SATSANG READER

PART 1

SATSANG PRAVESH

A Textbook of the Satsang Examinations Series: 7

Satsang Reader

Part 1

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Gujarati Text: Sadhu Ishwarcharandas

Inspirer: HDH Pramukh Swami Maharaj

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Glossary

Blessings

The youth movement established and nourished by Brahmaswarup Yogiji Maharaj has been expanding at a very rapid pace. With a view to satisfying the aspirations and the thirst for knowledge of the youth joining the organization, and also to enable them to understand and imbibe the principles of Akshar and Purushottam expounded by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, the publications division, Swaminarayan Aksharpith, organized under the auspices of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, presents a series of books.

Through these books, it is intended to impart systematic, sustained and pure knowledge in simple language on a scholastic basis to children and youth of the Swaminarayan Sampradaya. It is hoped that this Sanstha, established by Brahmaswarup Shastriji Maharaj for implementing and propagating the Vedic ideals propounded by Bhagwan Swaminarayan, will, through this activity, spread the ideals and noble traditions of the Sampradaya and through it, the culture and heritage of the Hindu religion.

It is the aim of this project to preach and spread the divine message of Bhagwan Swaminarayan to all corners of the world. We hope that all religious-minded truth-seekers of the Sampradaya and those outside of it, will welcome this activity and extend their fullest co-operation.

In order to encourage children and youths, annual examinations are held based on the curriculum as worked out in these books. Certificates are also awarded to successful candidates. We bless Pujya Ishwarcharan Swami, Prof. Rameshbhai Dave, Kishorebhai Dave, and all others who have cooperated in the preparation of these books.

Shastri Narayanswarupdasji
(Pramukh Swami Maharaj)
Jai Swaminarayan

Vasant Panchmi
V.S. 2028 (1972 ce)
Atladra

Publisher's Note

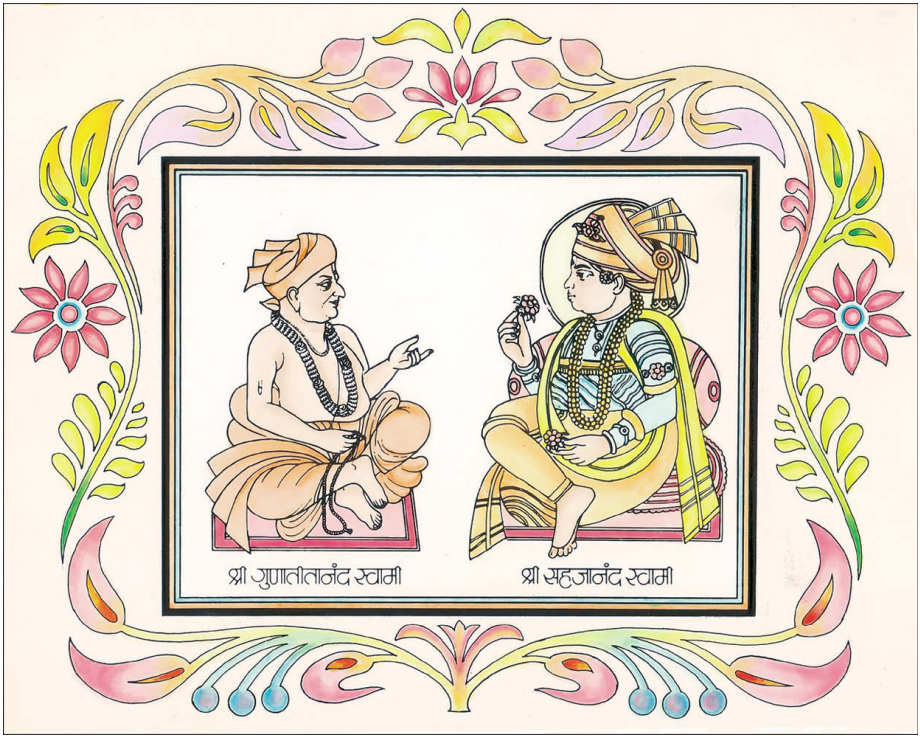
Purna Purushottam Bhagwan Swaminarayan incarnated on this earth out of compassion and grace. During his life on earth, he inspired many to attain the highest spiritual state. The lives of these sadhus, and male and female devotees serve as an example for all on how to worship God and attain his divine bliss. Shriji Maharaj's work has been continued by the lineage of God-realized Sadhus he established. Spiritual seekers who have associated with them have also attained the ultimate spiritual bliss.

This publication, *Satsang Reader Part 1*, contains the short biographies of a selection of such sadhus and devotees since the time of Bhagwan Swaminarayan. It is a translation of the Gujarati book *Satsang Vachanmala Part 1*.

The book is part of the curriculum for the third level of the Satsang Examinations, Satsang Parichay, conducted by the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha.

It is our earnest prayer that all devotees, young and old, will study this book carefully and pass the examinations with flying colours and, above all, derive immense spiritual benefit and earn the blessings of our guru, His Divine Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj.

- Swaminarayan Aksharpith



Ame sau Swāminā bālak, marishu Swāmine māte;
Ame sau Shrijitanā yuvak, ladishu Shrijine māte...
Nathi dartā nathi kartā, amārā jānni parvā;
Amāre dar nathi koino, ame janmyā chhie marvā...ame 1
Ame ā yagna ārambhyo, balidāno ame daishu;
Amārā Akshar Purushottam, Gunātit jnānne gāishu...ame 2
Ame sau Shriji tanā putro, Akshare vās amāro chhe;
Svadharmi bhasma choli to, amāre kshobh shāno chhe...ame 3
Juo sau motinā Swāmi, na rākhi kai te khāmi;
Pragat Purushottam pāmi, malyā Gunātit Swāmi...ame 4

Translation

Pledge: Ame Sau Swamina Balak...

We are the children of Swami; we will die for him. We are the youths of Shriji Maharaj; we will fight for him. We are fearless; we will not shirk sacrificing our lives, for we are born to die. We have launched this movement and will undergo any suffering. We will sing the praises of Akshar-Purushottam.

We are the sons of Shriji Maharaj; we have our abode in Akshar. Consecrated as we are to *swadharma* (religious faith), we have no apprehension whatsoever. Lord Purushottam and Akshar, Gunatitanand Swami, are with us. We have accomplished our

goal.

1. Sadguru Brahmanand Swami

Sadguru Brahmanand Swami

The Royal Court of Shirohi was filled to capacity. At the Maharaja's behest, the

young poet Ladudanji began to recite several poems he had created himself. The child's powerful and eloquent delivery captivated the audience, and as the recital came to an end, applause thundered throughout the hall.

As the crowd whispered in amazement, the Maharaja thought to himself, "How great it would be if the brilliance of this invaluable jewel of our state were to spread everywhere!"

Soon after, through a dream, God inspired the poet's mother and father, Laluba and Shambhundanji, with the same thought. So, when the Maharaja approached them with the idea of having Ladudanji study further, they readily agreed. Thus, with a Brahmin as his companion and with the blessings of all, Ladudanji set out to learn Pingal Shastra, the science of poetry, in Bhuj.

Born on Vasant Panchmi (Maha *sud* 5), Samvat 1828 (8 February 1772 CE), in the village of Khan in the Shirohi region of present-day Rajasthan, Ladudanji's natural poetic ability, apparent from a young age, developed rapidly with his studies in Bhuj. Here, he stayed as a guest of the Rao, or king, of Kutch and studied under the guidance of Guru Abhaydanji.

After ten years of rigorous study, Ladudanji had become an expert in Pingal and other poetic sciences, and his brilliance had earned the respect and pleasure of Abhaydanji.

However, the Rao still wanted to test Ladudanji's knowledge, so he arranged for Ladudanji to perform before the Royal Court. The young man passed the Rao's test with flying colours, earning the pleasure of the Rao and his court. In fact, so pleased was the Rao that he rewarded Ladudanji handsomely and conferred on him the titles of Rajkaviratna, Pingal-vidyacharya, Mahamahopadhyaya, Mahakavishvar Shatavdhani and others. The king further requested Ladudanji to permanently serve the state as the royal poet. Ladudanji, however, longed to return to his hometown. He thus bade the Rao farewell, forever remembering his debt.

On his way back to Khan, Ladudanji stopped in the town of Dhamadka in Kutch to learn Sanskrit and music from the renowned pandit Bhattacharya. It was during his time in Dhamadka that Ladudanji met Ramanand Swami and received his blessings for the first time.

After completing his studies with Pandit Bhattacharya, Ladudanji continued on and was received with great honour in the states of Dhrangadhra, Jamnagar, Dwarka and Junagadh. In each of these places, Ladudanji's performances won over his patrons, who presented him precious gifts as a sign of honour and appreciation.

However, while performing before King Vajesinh and the Royal Court of Bhavnagar, Ladudanji exceeded even his own limits. The king was so pleased with Ladudanji's performance that he called for the royal goldsmith and commanded him to adorn the poet with gold ornaments.

As the goldsmith approached Ladudanji to take the necessary measurements, the poet was surprised to see a distinctive *tilak* mark of sandalwood paste and a large round *chandlo* of vermilion on the goldsmith's forehead.

Just as Ladudanji began to inquire about the *tilak-chandlo*, the king interrupted. "I

have a dilemma that you have to solve," he said, looking at Ladudanji. "In my kingdom, there is a village called Gadhada. An individual by the name of Swaminarayan has come to this village. The Kathis believe him to be God. To me, it all sounds like a hoax, but please go there yourself and find out the truth."

Being young and full of pride of his skills and fame, Ladudanji, along with his maternal uncle, left straight away for Gadhada to expose Swaminarayan. But as Ladudanji made his way to Gadhada, he began to doubt himself. He began to wonder if Swaminarayan was actually God. "Then he should fulfil my wishes," he thought and so he decided to test Swaminarayan with four wishes:

"Let him place the rose garland he is wearing around my neck and call me by my name."

"Let him show me the sixteen divine signs on his feet."

"Let him introduce me by relating my life story."

"Let him be reading from the Bhagvat wrapped in a black cloth."

With such thoughts racing through his mind, Ladudanji entered Gadhada. Immediately thereafter he experienced absolute peace and calm. At that time Maharaj was sitting in an assembly of sadhus and devotees under the neem tree in Dada Khachar's *darbar*. A garland of roses adorned his neck. In front of him lay the Bhagvat, wrapped in a black cloth.

As Ladudanji entered the *darbar,* Maharaj called him by his name and welcomed him by placing the rose garland he was wearing around his neck. He then related the poet's life story and then showed him the sixteen signs on his feet.

Maharaj had fulfilled each and every one of Ladudanji's wishes. The poet's happiness knew no bounds, and as his heart swelled with joy, he spontaneously composed and sang a kirtan:

"Dhanya ājni ghadi re, dhanya ājni ghadi,
Me nirakhya Sahajānand, dhanya ājni ghadi, Dhanya...
Gnānkuchi guru gamase, gayā tālā ughadi,
Lādu Sahajānand nihāltā, thari ānkhadi re, Dhanya..."

Meaning, "Blessed is this moment, indeed blessed is this moment
Yes, he who has seen Swami Sahajanand
Blessed is the moment.
The key to knowledge he has got from his Guru
And the doors of liberation have been opened.
Ladu has seen Sahajanand
And his eyes are filled with supreme joy."

The doors of the poet's heart were opened, and as his eyes met with Maharaj's, Ladudanji went into samadhi. Frightened by seeing the still body of his nephew, the poet's uncle began to rebuke Maharaj, but he, too, was soon swept into samadhi as the assembled devotees marvelled at the sight before them.

Divine light, such that the poet had never seen before, spread all around, and within it stood Maharaj's beautiful *murti*, surrounded by all the past avatars, who were singing his praise with folded hands. With this divine vision fixed in the poet's eyes, tears of

joy flowed and his heart swelled with emotion. On awakening from samadhi he surrendered to Maharaj, falling at Maharaj's feet and praying that he be forever blessed with devotion.

Just as a doll made of salt melts as it ventures to fathom the depth of the ocean, Ladudanji, who had come to prove Maharaj was a hoax, ended up with Maharaj's *murti* installed in his heart. Ladudanji ceased being a court poet. He was now Maharaj's devotee.

* * *

After a few days, Maharaj requested Ladudanji to speak with Dada Khachar's sisters. He explained that Dada's sisters, Laduba and Jivuba, were married, yet they lived according to the celibate rules of sadhus. Maharaj further added that their behaviour reflected badly on upon him. So saying, Maharaj asked Ladudanji to go and persuade the sisters to marry and live as normal householders.

Jivuba and Laduba had a vow not to look at men other than Maharaj, and so when Ladudanji went to meet them, he arranged for a curtain to be placed between the sisters and himself. After the curtain was arranged, Ladudanji began to explain to them that it was their responsibility as lay-people to get married.

The sisters listened to the poet calmly. After hearing him out, they replied, "The body appears charming because of the soul within. It is the soul that makes the body move, walk and talk. Without the soul, the body has no value."

So saying, the sisters continued, "You adorn yourself with beautiful clothes and ornaments, but if someone is attracted towards you because of your looks, who will be responsible for that sin? It will be none other than you. Therefore, give up your flashy lifestyle and lead a virtuous life, a life full of bhakti."

Ladudanji was deeply touched by the sisters' divine words and immediately went to Maharaj and gave up his rich clothes and ornaments. He then asked Maharaj to make him a sadhu, so Maharaj initiated him into the sadhu-fold and gave him the name Shrirangdas. However, his name soon changed to Brahmanand, literally meaning divine joy, because his cheerful nature and poetic skills never failed to bring a smile to Maharaj's face.

* * *

Leaving Ladudanji in Gadhada, the poet's uncle soon came to Khan and related to his family all that had transpired. After hearing what Ladudanji had done, the family decided to go to Gadhada to persuade him to return home.

However, once they arrived in Gadhada, Brahmanand Swami explained to them about Maharaj's unparalleled greatness. He told them that he had found God and so it was his final decision to renounce the world in order to fulfil his purpose in life.

To his fiance, who had also come to Gadhada with the family, he composed a kirtan and had it conveyed to her. The kirtan's words were:

"Re sagpana Harivarnu sāchu,
biju sarve kshanbhangur kāchu."

Meaning, “The only true relationship is that with God; all the rest is momentary and fragile.”

“I believe only my betrothal to God as everlasting and real and the type of betrothal you are describing is temporary and false.”

Brahmanand Swami’s family members continued to beg him to change his mind, yet, all the while, he remained determined. His decision was firm and irrevocable.

In spite of all this and in order to test Brahmanand Swami’s resolve, Maharaj directed him to go back home. Taken by surprise, Brahmanand Swami felt as if lightning had struck him and he suddenly fainted.

Everyone’s hearts melted upon seeing Brahmanand Swami’s sincere and deep attachment to Maharaj.

But, his mother still had one worry: Who would now give Ladudanji the love that she had once given him? Reading her thoughts, Maharaj promised her that he himself would act as Brahmanand Swami’s mother and offer him love and affection. He then presented her a sanctified cloth and pleased the entire family.

Having accepted Brahmanand Swami’s decision and appreciating his firm faith in Maharaj, the family began to prepare for the journey back to Rajasthan.

* * *

The greatest of scholars were impressed by Brahmanand Swami’s outstanding personality, vast knowledge and powerful speaking skills. Under his influence, many of them came to accept Maharaj’s refuge.

Brahmanand Swami often accompanied Maharaj in his travels from village to village. Yet, at Maharaj’s request, he once went to Surat to carry on further studies of Sanskrit. There, he studied in the ashram of Munibawa, a profound scholar of Sanskrit and an adherent of the Vedant philosophy.

Due to his profound scholarship, Munibawa was a favourite of the state. By nature, he was arrogant. Yet, Brahmanand Swami, with his sheer humility and brilliant intellect, won him over. During his time with Munibawa, not only did Brahmanand Swami become an expert in Sanskrit, but he also explained to Munibawa the significance of *atma* and Paramatma and the greatness of Shriji Maharaj.

Brahmanand Swami’s words changed Munibawa, who saw the light of God in his words. After his experience with Brahmanand Swami, he yearned for Maharaj’s darshan.

So, when the opportunity presented itself, Munibawa accompanied Brahmanand Swami to Gadhada, anxious to meet Maharaj. Yet, once the two reached the village, Maharaj was totally indifferent to Munibawa. It was as if Munibawa was not even worthy of recognition.

“Maharaj,” Muktanand Swami said, drawing his attention. “Munibawa is here.”

“Who is Munibawa?” Maharaj inquired casually, not even bothering to look at the great scholar.

Maharaj’s indifference hurt Munibawa’s ego. Upset, the scholar left the assembly and prepared to return to Surat. However, Muktanand Swami and Brahmanand Swami

persuaded him to stay. They honoured him on the spot and also arranged a grand reception for him at the *darbars* of Dada Khachar, Jiva Khachar and other village chieftains. Jiva Khachar and others also gave him gifts. Munibawa was greatly pleased by the honours.

The next day, the scholar went to Dada Khachar's *darbar* for the *arti* of Lord Vasudev-Narayan. As Munibawa entered, he saw Maharaj standing in the veranda between two pillars with both his hands stretched wide. Behind him stood an attendant, Bhaguji, holding a 20 kg cushion, waiting for Maharaj to let him pass so he could finish arranging his seat for him.

Turning back to look at Bhaguji, Maharaj took the enormous cushion from his hands and then spun it on his finger, finally tossing it towards the neem tree, where his seat was arranged. The cushion landed on Maharaj's seat just in the correct position.

Munibawa was amazed that Maharaj was able to lift such a heavy pillow with just one finger, spin it and throw it so precisely. He saw in Maharaj the divine power of Shri Krishna, who had held Mount Govardhan up on just one finger.

Munibawa went to Maharaj and bowed to him with folded hands. Maharaj seated him nearby, then took off his own rose garland and placed it around the scholar's neck. By Maharaj's grace, as Munibawa inhaled the fragrance of the roses he experienced samadhi.

Upon coming out of samadhi, Munibawa was convinced of Maharaj's supremacy. He stood humbly, requesting Maharaj to initiate him as a sadhu. Maharaj agreed and soon initiated him, yet kept his name as Munibawa. Brahmanand Swami was delighted.

At Maharaj's behest, the scholar, now one of Maharaj's sadhus, returned to Surat and brought many of his followers, including state officials, such as Ardeshar Kotwal and others, into the fellowship.

After having joined the fellowship, Ardeshar Kotwal invited Maharaj to Surat and organized a grand reception for him. Pleased with Kotwal's devotion, Maharaj presented him with his *pagh* as a gift.

* * *

Shriji Maharaj once went to Kutch along with his sadhus and devotees. Here, in the town of Mandvi, he sat Brahmanand Swami on a horse and arranged a grand procession for him.

In Mandvi there lived a great learned scholar of Vedant by the name of Khaiyo Khatri. When he learnt of Maharaj's arrival in town, he challenged Maharaj to a scriptural debate.

Realizing the scholar's intentions, Maharaj devised a plan.

Turning to Brahmanand Swami, he said, "When Khaiyo Khatri arrives for the debate, you sit in my place, and I shall sit on the ground nearby. When he asks you questions, point to me and tell him, 'This disciple of mine will answer all your questions.'"

Brahmanand Swami hesitated, for Maharaj was asking him to play the role of God. Yet, he was helpless in the face of Maharaj's command.

Khaiyo Khatri and his disciples soon arrived in the assembly. Khaiyo's eyes fell on Brahmanand Swami. Seated on Maharaj's seat, Brahmanand Swami looked imposing on account of his good looks and physique. Taking Brahmanand Swami to be Bhagwan Swaminarayan himself, Khaiyo began asking him questions.

"This disciple of mine will reply," Brahmanand Swami said, pointing towards Maharaj.

Maharaj gave clear and logical replies to each of Khaiyo's questions. His unfailing answers left the scholar taken aback and wondering which of the two was the real Swaminarayan

Khaiyo's mother, sitting afar, quelled his doubt. "Look, my son," she said. "This younger sadhu sitting on the ground is God. The sadhu sitting on the seat is a fake!"

Seeing Khaiyo's confusion, Maharaj burst out laughing.

Brahmanand Swami at once got up and had Maharaj sit on the high seat. He himself sat on the ground.

Khaiyo's misconceptions about Maharaj were cleared. Once a critic, Khaiyo Khatri now became a devotee.

* * *

Maharaj had begun constructing mandirs. To supervise the building of the first mandir in Ahmedabad, Maharaj sent Brahmanand Swami, an expert at managing such affairs. In Ahmedabad, Brahmanand Swami met General Gordon, an official of the British government, and obtained from him an unlimited deed for the land on which the mandir was to be built.

Construction soon began. Brahmanand Swami, although in charge of the entire project, also helped in the routine labour work. He assisted in such tasks as cutting stones, preparing lime mortar and digging foundation pits. Amidst such rigorous work, however, he continued to compose poems. Whenever he had time he would jot down some lines of poetry.

The new mandir was soon completed. A grand celebration was held and the *murtis* of Nar-Narayan Dev were consecrated.

Soon after Ahmedabad mandir was built, Maharaj instructed Brahmanand Swami to build a mandir in Vartal. Maharaj told him to build a one-pinnacled mandir in Vartal. However, Brahmanand Swami began to build a three-pinnacled mandir.

As the soil of Gujarat was soft, it was necessary to dig deep foundations. A great amount of resources thus went into the mandir's foundation. Thus, Maharaj wrote him a letter advising him to stay within the available means.

Brahmanand Swami replied to Maharaj with a couplet:

Saheb sarikhā shethiyā, base nagarki māhi,
Tāke dhanki kyā kami! Jāki hundi chale navkhand māhi...”

Meaning, "A wealthy man lives in this city, what then is lacking for him whose bills are accepted in all the nine continents?"

"For one whose cheque is accepted everywhere, he is not likely to lack in funds."

Pleased with Brahmanand Swami's understanding, Maharaj allowed him to continue

with his plans.

Maharaj often used to visit Vartal to watch over the mandir construction. Due to his guidance and inspiration, the mandir was soon complete. Amidst much celebration, Maharaj consecrated the *murtis* of Lakshmi-Narayan Dev in the central shrine and his own *murti*, called 'Harikrishna', in the first shrine.

Maharaj next sent Brahmanand Swami, and along with him Gunatitanand Swami, to build the next mandir in Junagadh. There was great opposition from the city's Nagar Brahmins. In response to the opposition, Brahmanand Swami convinced the city's *nawab*, or head administrator, of Maharaj's greatness. Brahmanand Swami thus won official backing for the mandir, greatly easing the work of building the mandir. The Nagar opposition subsided.

Within a short time the mandir was complete and Maharaj arrived for its opening. A grand reception, in the form of a procession, was arranged to take Maharaj through the streets of Junagadh. Yet, the Nagars were still burning with rage. Seeking revenge, they sent an untamed horse for Brahmanand Swami to ride during the reception. Yet, Swami's mere touch calmed the horse immediately. Maharaj thus used to call Brahmanand Swami a true *yati*.

The *murtis* of Radha-Raman Dev were consecrated in the new mandir. The *nawab*, pleased by Maharaj's presence, ceremoniously received Maharaj and his sadhus in his palace. He then asked Maharaj to bless him with good fortunes. Maharaj blessed the *nawab*, pleasing him. Moreover, by the *nawab*'s request, he appointed a great sadhu like Gunatitanand Swami as the new mandir's mahant.

* * *

Maharaj used to test his sadhus in many different ways. One of these tests came in the form of a new rule – each sadhu was to be given a four-and-a-half feet piece of jute, the thick, rough material from which sacks are made, to use as clothing.

One after the other, all the sadhus came to collect their piece of jute. Brahmanand Swami came as well. Despite Brahmanand Swami's large size, Maharaj gave him four-and-a-half feet, just as he had given to all the other sadhus.

"Maharaj," Brahmanand Swami said. "I am large. This much jute just won't be enough. Please give me a little more."

"Rules are rules," Maharaj replied. "Lose some weight. Fast a bit."

"But how can I lose weight this very instant?" Brahmanand Swami asked, puzzled as to what to do next.

Suddenly, a thought appeared in his mind. He began looking up, down and all around.

"What are you looking at?" Maharaj asked.

"In this world, there is not even an inch of land where there is any God other than you," Brahmanand Swami replied. "There is no choice but for me to stay here with you."

Seeing Brahmanand Swami's firm faith, Maharaj was pleased and instantly gave him a larger piece of jute.

* * *

Maharaj had made yet another rule for his sadhus – nobody was to doze in the assembly. Whenever Maharaj caught someone dozing, he would throw his *berkho* at them.

Once, in the night assembly, Maharaj caught Brahmanand Swami dozing. He threw his *berkho* on him. Brahmanand Swami woke up with a startle. He then got up and returned the *berkho* to Maharaj.

"Maharaj," Brahmanand Swami addressed. "Why did you throw the *berkho*?"

"You were dozing," Maharaj replied.

"I wasn't dozing, Maharaj. I was composing a kirtan."

Brahmanand Swami's quick-witted answer amused Maharaj. "Then let us hear your kirtan," Maharaj challenged.

Brahmanand Swami thus began:

Tāro chatak rangilo chhedalo, Albelā re,
Kāi naval kasumbi pāgh, rangnā relā re…

Meaning, "Oh charming one, how bright red is the end of your upper garment;

"How crimson red is your headgear, splashed all over is the colour red."

Brahmanand Swami would sing a line, and while the audience sang in chorus, he would compose the next line. In this manner, he instantly composed four verses. Although Maharaj and the sadhus knew that Brahmanand Swami was really dozing, they were delighted to see his exceptional poetic skills.

* * *

Once, Maharaj had fallen ill in Gadhada. During his illness, he would call Brahmanand Swami to see him every day, praising him and giving him *prasad* from his dish.

Brahmanand Swami, however, had his doubts. "There had to be a reason why Maharaj was treating him so well," he thought.

Maharaj's condition gradually worsened. Brahmanand Swami prepared *sanjivani*, an elixir, but Maharaj refused to take it. Other sadhus also requested Maharaj to take the medicine, but Maharaj was adamant.

"Maharaj may not stay on earth much longer," Brahmanand Swami thought.

However, to Brahmanand Swami's dismay, Maharaj instructed him to go to Junagadh. Who would ever wish to leave Maharaj at such a time, he thought.

Realizing Brahmanand Swami's predicament, Maharaj consoled him. "Go, and once you reach there, send Gunatitanand Swami here immediately," Maharaj added.

With a heavy heart, Brahmanand Swami left for Junagadh. Once there, he told Gunatitanand Swami that Maharaj had called for him.

Gunatitanand Swami left for Gadhada immediately upon hearing Brahmanand Swami's words. Having arrived in Gadhada, he met Maharaj. Soon after, Maharaj left his physical body and returned to his divine abode, Akshardham.

* * *

With Maharaj's return to Akshardham, Brahmanand Swami was not able to focus on anything. But Maharaj had instructed him to build a mandir in Muli, and so he soon set out to begin work on the mandir.

However, there was scarcity of water and stones for building the mandir. But Maharaj gave darshan to Brahmanand Swami and showed him a stone mine. The building of Muli mandir was Brahmanand Swami's final task, and so he made the mandir a marvellous work of art, full of traditional designs. The mandir was completed in a short time and the Acharya of Ahmedabad performed the *murti-pratishtha* amidst much festivity.

Thereafter, Brahmanand Swami began living in Muli. He would often sit in the mandir and sing beautiful kirtans before the *murtis*. He had obeyed Maharaj's wishes and now he was focused on becoming one with Maharaj.

Soon, Brahmanand Swami fell ill. Devanand Swami and other sadhus were constantly in his service. Brahmanand Swami called Nishkulanand Swami, Gunatitanand Swami, Acharya Maharaj and others to come to grant him darshan one last time. Once they arrived, Brahmanand Swami called Gunatitanand Swami and said, "Don't be in a hurry to come to Akshardham. Continue spreading the knowledge of Maharaj's true glory, as you have been doing until now. Don't come until Maharaj's greatness has spread everywhere."

Soon thereafter Brahmanand Swami passed away to Akshardham on Jeth *sud* 10, Samvat 1888 (8 June 1832 CE) to forever remain in the service of Shriji Maharaj.

A shining jewel amongst Maharaj's inner circle of devotees, Brahmanand Swami served the Sampraday in many ways. His contributions include building grand mandirs in Ahmedabad, Vartal, Junagadh and Muli. Moreover, he enriched the Sampraday's literature, as well as Gujarati literature in general, with his extraordinary poetic skills. He composed over 8,000 kirtans in Gujarati and other languages. His specialties in poetry were *chhand* and *chopai*, metrical forms with which very few are conversant today. Through his bhajans, he related teachings on spirituality, the greatness of *atma* and Paramatma, the path of devotion, the beauty and glory of Maharaj's *murti* and many other topics.

The following are some of his well-known works: *Brahmanand Kavya, Shri Sumatiprakash, Brahmavilas, Shikshapatri* (in verse), *Updesh Chintamani Chandravala, Updesh Ratnadipak.*

Some of his lesser known works include: *Nitiprakash, Shikshapatri* (in Hindi), *Sampraday Pradip, Dharmasiddhant, Vartman Vivek, Shri Narayan Gita, Vivek Chintamani, Sati Gita, Dharmavansh Prakash.*

Brahmanand Swami's architectural and literary contributions to the Sampraday and to the region are thus invaluable and will live on forever.

Example of Brahmanand Swami's Work

Tārā mukhni lāvantā mithi re, Mohan Vanmali,

Evi tribhuvanmā nav dithi re, murti marmāli..
Chatak rangilā tārā molidāne chhede;
Mandu dole chhe kede kede re...Mohan.1
Rangdo jāmyo chhe fuldāne tore,
Bhramar bhame chhe chahukore re...Mohan.2
Bhāl tilak kesar keru raje,
Mukh joi shashiyar lāje re...Mohan.3
Brahmānand kahe sarvasva vāru,
Rup joine vahalā tāru re...Mohan.4

Meaning

Sweet is the charm of your face O Mohan, the gardener! Nowhere in the world have I seen such a wonderful figure;

My mind runs after the bright red ends of your garment. O Mohan...1

Bright is the colour of the flowers of the garlands you wear. And the bees hum all around you, O Mohan...2

Saffron tilak mark adorns your forehead and puts the moon itself to shame, O Mohan...3

Says Brahmanand: seeing your beauty, O Dear one I shower all that is mine on you, O Mohan...4

2. Sadguru Devanand Swami

Sadguru Devanand Swami

On the outskirts of the villages of Balol and Dhingda, in the present-day district of

Ahmedabad, there is a small, beautiful mandir dedicated to Lord Shiv, known as Sankaleshwar Mahadev. Jijibhai, who lived in Balol, was one of the many devotees who used to go to the mandir everyday to worship and pray before Shivji. His five-year-old son, Devidan, would go with him, holding his father's finger and keenly observing his father's deep devotion and worship. This daily ritual left an indelible mark on Devidan regarding the importance of worship and prayer.

Some time later, Jijibhai had to go out of town to attend a discourse. So, to continue his father's tradition of worship, Devidan went to the mandir alone. He had eagerly watched his father's daily routine, and so as he sat before the *murti* of Shivji, feelings of devotion and an inner desire to please Shivji poured from his innocent heart. Full of affection, as if Lord Shiv were really present before him, he devoutly offered *abhishek* and *bilipatra* to the *murti*. He then fixed his gaze on Shivji, yearning to meet him.

Devidan's heartfelt prayers were answered. Shivji appeared before him, granting him darshan. Choked with emotion, the child folded his hands and prayed, his heart filled with nothing other than a wish for liberation.

Pleased with Devidan's pure devotion, Shivji granted him a boon. "Bhagwan Purushottam Narayan himself will come to your village and will show his divine powers. Seek refuge at his feet. Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, will reside in your heart."

Born in Balol, near Dholka, on 9 November 1802 (Kartik *sud* Punam, Samvat 1859), Devidan was a changed boy. After having Shivji's darshan his mind became constantly drawn towards devotion. Even his mother, Benjiba, noticed the change in him.

Around this time, Shriji Maharaj came to Balol after completing a *yagna* in nearby Jetalpur. The townspeople gathered around Maharaj's bullock cart for darshan. They insisted that he stay.

However, Maharaj needed to move on, so in the hope of serving Maharaj before he left, Raya Khatan, a devotee, quickly brought a bowl of milk and *thuli*, a preparation of wheat flakes. Accepting the *thuli*, Maharaj rolled his sleeves up to his elbows, sat on the yoke of the cart, the portion tied to the bullocks. He let his feet dangle to the ground and he soon began to eat. But as he ate, streams of milk trickled down to his elbows. Seeing the streams, Maharaj leaned over and licked each from his elbows straight up to his hands.

Devidan was surprised, yet Maharaj's *murti* had long since left him enchanted.

Maharaj's eyes soon fell on Devidan. Knowing the young boy to be a great soul from the past, Maharaj lovingly called him forth. Devidan ran towards Maharaj, falling at his feet and expressed his wish to travel with him. Pleased, Maharaj agreed with his idea, but coaxed him to first ask his parents. So, Devidan asked his parents and once they had agreed, he joined Maharaj. He was soon put under Brahmanand Swami's care.

Brahmanand Swami had Devidan serve with him for some time, after which Maharaj initiated him as a sadhu, naming him Devanand Swami.

As a sadhu, Devanand Swami began to learn music and Pingal, the science of poetry from Brahmanand Swami while also learning to play the sitar. In just a short time,

Devanand Swami became an expert in all of these fields due, in part, to his past *samskaras*. And, it was due to his qualities as a celibate sadhu, his lack of ego, and his intense devotion, that Devanand Swami became renowned in the fellowship and soon took his place amongst Maharaj's eight most famous poets – Devanand Swami, Premanand Swami, Brahmanand Swami, Muktanand Swami, Nishkulanand Swami, Bhumanand Swami, Manjukeshanand Swami and Dayanand Swami.

Throughout his life, Devanand Swami wrote thousands of kirtans, most describing spiritual teachings with an emphasis on detachment. Using simple language and everyday examples, he elegantly explained important spiritual lessons and wrote of the futility of worldly life, inspiring souls to turn their attention towards God. He also wrote of potential fallbacks on the spiritual path in a rather blunt style. His eye-opening verses are thus popularly known in the fellowship as the 'lashes' of Devanand Swami.

Devanand Swami's verses had quite an impact. In fact, upon hearing them, Dalpatram, a very famous Indian poet, was so moved that he decided to become Devanand Swami's student. Devanand Swami thus taught Dalpatram poetic metre, figurative writing, descriptive writing, word usage and the art of instant composition. Devanand Swami's guidance, as well as his blessings, moulded Dalpatram into a great poet. Devanand Swami was pleased to see his student's progress and extraordinary poetic skills, but rather than taking the credit himself, he used to say, "This is all due to Maharaj's grace."

Aside from being an expert in music and poetry, Devanand Swami had a deep understanding of spirituality and firm faith in Maharaj. His blessings would drive away people's miseries and would fulfil their wishes, yet he remained humble, always crediting his abilities to Shriji Maharaj's grace.

After Brahmanand Swami went to Akshardham, Devanand Swami succeeded him as mahant of Muli mandir. As mahant, he completed construction of the mandir and surrounding buildings, and with his expertise in management, he greatly increased the mandir's prosperity.

On 28 August 1853 (Shravan *vad* 9, Samvat 1910), Devanand Swami told a Merai devotee, "I am going to *dham* tomorrow, so please make a wooden chair to take my body to the funeral pyre."

The devotee was surprised, for Devanand Swami looked perfectly healthy. Doubting his words, the devotee refused to make the chair.

Devanand Swami, however, continued. "If five footsteps of *kumkum* show up at the entrance to your home tomorrow, believe what I say to be true," he said.

The next day, the devotee saw the kumkum footsteps Devanand Swami had mentioned. Taken aback, he hurriedly left for the mandir. When he arrived, he learned that Devanand Swami had passed away. The devotee was stricken with grief.

Soon after, Devanand Swami's body was taken to the river bank, where his final rites were performed.

Examples of Devanand Swami's Kirtans

Mānasno avatār mogho, nahi male fari...Mānas. 1

Mān, mardāi, motap meli, bhajilo Hari;
Nahi to jāsho chorāshimā, janam bahu dhari...Mānas. 2
Dukh tano dariyāv moto, nahi shako tari;
Shamaliyāne sharane jātā, jāsho ugari...Mānas. 3
Nirlaj tu navro na rahyo, ghardhandho kari;
Māyā māyā karto murakh, nā bethho thhari...Mānas. 4
Cheti le chittmā vichāri, chālaje dari,
Devānandno Nāth bhajo, premmā bhari...Manas. 5

Meaning

Human incarnation is difficult to get, you will not get it again...1
Forsake your pride and arrogance and devote yourself to God;
Otherwise you will be forced to pass through eighty-four
lakh incarnations taking birth again and again...2
It is difficult to cross the great ocean of pain;
You will get over it if you surrender yourself to God...3
Oh shameful one, you did not keep quiet;
You went on doing this and that crying 'maya', 'maya'...4
Think in your mind and be warned, walk cautiously;
Worship Devanand's God and fill yourself with love...5

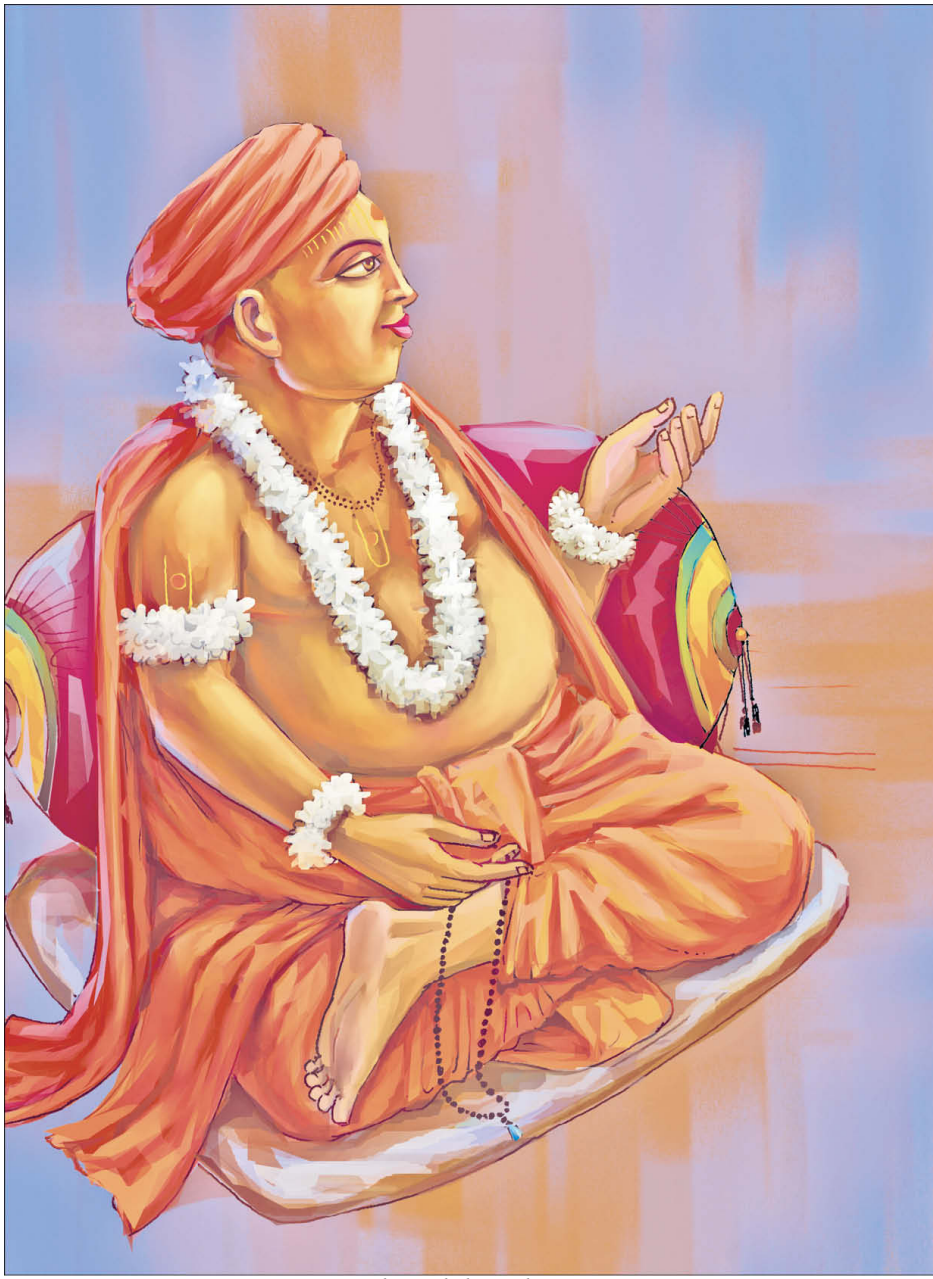
* * *

Bhaji le Bhagwānne, sāchā Santne mali...Bhaji. 1
Vachanmā vishvās rākhi, bhajanmā bhali,
Purav kerā pāp tārā, to jāshe bali...Bhaji. 2
Olkhi le Avināshi, raheje gnānmā gali,
Rijhshe rangrel Vālo, adhalak dhali...Bhaji. 3
Kāl to vikrāl veri, vinkhashe vali;
Kām ne kutumb tune nākhshe dali...Bhaji. 4
Satya tyā sukh dharma rahe, kud tahā kali;
Devānand kahe duniyā keri akkal āndhali...Bhaji. 5

Meaning

Pray to God through association with a true sadhu...1
Have faith in testimony and immerse in bhajan;
Your former sins shall thereby be redeemed...2
Know the Lord, and immerse yourself in knowledge;
He shall bestow His grace in all spontaneity...3
Kala is a ferocious enemy, it may pounce any moment;
Lust and family will grind you to pieces...4
Happiness and Dharma stay where there is *satya*,
Kali stays where there is no dharma;
Devanand says that the world is blind to stark realities...5

3. Sadguru Shukanand Swami



Sadguru Shukanand Swami

Jagannath, a Brahmin originally from Nadiad, had settled in Dabhan. He was born

in 1799 (Samvat 1855), and due to his family's noble values he grew into a brilliant child. Also, due to his natural intelligence he excelled in studies.

From the beginning a natural detachment from the world was evident in him. It was as if he were a soul reborn simply to complete yogic austerities begun long ago. The virtuous naturally attract good qualities. Thus, he was also proficient in managing social duties and became an expert at land deals and other related work.

At the time, a number of Shriji Maharaj's *paramhansas* were studying in Dabhan under a learned scholar. Jagannath, with his inherent liking for *satsang*, came in touch with these *paramhansas*. Seeing their pure lifestyle, he developed great love and respect for them and soon began to serve them. In return, the *paramhansas* would speak to him of Maharaj's greatness. Touched by their words, Jagannath became eager to have Maharaj's darshan and hear his talks. So, without giving it a second thought, Jagannath renounced home and left for Gadhada.

As Jagannath came to the village outskirts, Maharaj was seated in an assembly underneath the neem tree in Dada Khachar's *darbar*.

"Let's go, let's go," Maharaj suddenly said to the assembled devotees. "A *mukta* is coming from Dabhan."

Maharaj's words left the devotees surprised. Yet, before anyone even had time to think, Maharaj was up and moving away. The devotees got up and followed him as he took the road to Radha Vav, a step well on Gadhada's outskirts.

Beaming due to the lustre of *brahmacharya*, and eager to embrace God, Jagannath strode quickly towards Maharaj. As soon as he saw Maharaj, he prostrated before him. Maharaj also ran towards him and welcomed him with an embrace.

Jagannath stayed with Maharaj in Gadhada. He deeply wished to become a sadhu, but he was hesitant to ask Maharaj himself. So, he requested Somla Khachar, "Ask Maharaj to make me a sadhu." So, Somla Khachar told Maharaj, "The Brahmin from Dabhan wants to become a sadhu."

Maharaj replied, "Take him to Muktanand Swami. He will make him a sadhu."

So, February 1816 (Maha, Samvat 1872), Muktanand Swami performed the Vedic rites, initiating Jagannath as a sadhu. He named him Shukanand Swami.

After the ceremony, Shukanand Swami went straight to Akshar Ordi and prostrated before Maharaj. Pleased at seeing the new sadhu, Maharaj got up and hugged him.

"What have you been named?" Maharaj asked.

"Shukanand!" he replied.

"It seems as if Muktanand Swami knows the name you had in your previous life," Maharaj commented, and instructed Shukanand Swami to stay in his service.

* * *

Also known as Shukmuni, Shukanand Swami lived in a room opposite Shriji Maharaj's residence, Akshar Ordi. There he spent his time writing and editing scriptures. He prepared manuscripts from original copies of the Vachanamrut and Satsangijivan, as well as drafts of the Sampraday's constitutional documents.

Shukmuni also served as Maharaj's secretary, writing and responding to his letters.

His neat and clear handwriting, and knowledge of prose and poetry in both Gujarati and Sanskrit shone through in his writings.

As secretary, Shukmuni often had to face Maharaj's tests of faith. One night, Maharaj was dictating a letter to him. Halfway through the letter Maharaj cancelled it and had him start all over again. Maharaj repeated this pattern late into the night. In fact, it got so late that even the candle lighting Maharaj's room had blown out. Maharaj, however, lit the room with a beam of light from the big toe of his right foot.

But, by the time the letter was finished it was morning. Shukmuni was late for the morning bath. All the other sadhus had already returned from their bath in the Ghela and finished their rituals. So Shukmuni began to worry about who would now accompany him for his bath? And without bathing and performing his morning worship rituals he would not be able to break his previous day's *ekadashi* fast.

Maharaj sensed Shukmuni's worry and said, "Here, take this *sukhdi* and use it today to freshen your mouth."

Maharaj's wish was for Shukmuni to break his fast there and then. So, Shukmuni followed Maharaj's wish and broke his fast. He then went later for his bath.

On another occasion, Shukmuni stayed up all night writing in the veranda in front of the Akshar Ordi. He had written fourteen pages by the time Maharaj came out of his room in the morning. Maharaj took Shukmuni's work in his hands and, suddenly, tore it and threw it into the courtyard. Shukmuni, however, did not utter a word in protest.

Nityanand Swami questioned Shukmuni, "Weren't you upset that Maharaj tore up a whole night's work without even looking at it?"

Shukmuni replied without thinking twice. "I wrote it to please Maharaj," he said. "If tearing it up pleased him, then so be it."

Shukmuni thus never allowed his mind to get in the way of his bhakti towards Maharaj.

* * *

Maharaj used to look after Shukmuni in many different ways, often giving him *prasad* from his dish.

Once, Shukmuni returned shivering from his early morning bath in the river Ghela. Seeing this, Maharaj asked Dada Khachar, pointing towards the ceiling, "Can't these support beams be removed? How about these shutters?" It seemed that Maharaj wished to make a fire for Shukmuni.

Immediately understanding Maharaj's wish, Dada Khachar called a carpenter to cut some wood. Dada Khachar then broke open a clay pot and lit a fire in it from the wood. He brought the fire before Maharaj, who then called Shukmuni and the other sadhus near to warm themselves. Maharaj was delighted.

* * *

When in Gadhada, Maharaj frequently went to Lakshmi Vadi, a farm belonging to Dada Khachar and his family. Here, there was a mango tree. When Maharaj sat on a cot underneath it, the tree's branches touched Maharaj's head. Seeing this, Maharaj would

say, “This mango tree seems to be quite eager to be close to me.” Continuing, in praise of Shukmuni, he would say, “This mango tree from Dabhan, the bullock from Dabhan and this Shukmuni from Dabhan, all three have been very useful to me. Shukmuni, in fact, is my right hand.”

In this way, Maharaj would remember Shukmuni and praise him profusely.

* * *

After Maharaj had passed away, Bhaguji, Maharaj’s attendant, once walked into the Akshar Ordi. As he walked in, he was surprised to find Maharaj seated on his bed.

Maharaj said, “Bhaguji, go call Shukmuni. I want to write a letter.”

Hearing Maharaj’s words, Bhaguji ran off to call Shukmuni. When Shukmuni arrived, Maharaj turned to him and said, “I want to write a letter. Please write as I speak.”

So saying, Maharaj dictated an entire letter to Shukmuni and had him read out loud what he had written. Shukmuni began reading, but Maharaj then disappeared, leaving Shukmuni with only the letter in his hands. This miracle was witnessed by everyone present.

* * *

After Maharaj had passed away, Shukmuni used to travel from village to village to spread Satsang. Yet, he still dearly missed Maharaj. During his travels, due to his zeal for renunciation and detachment, he would often pray that he be blessed with illness. The reason being that his body would become weak, helping him to avoid the pleasures of the senses. Maharaj answered his prayers. Thus, Shukmuni would serve the Satsang during the day, and would fall ill at night. This routine continued for twelve years.

* * *

Shukmuni had much affection for Gunatitanand Swami, as Maharaj had many times revealed to him Gunatitanand Swami’s eternal greatness. On one such occasion, Gunatitanand Swami had come to the Akshar Ordi for Maharaj’s darshan. Seeing him enter, Shukmuni scrambled to find a seat for him.

Seeing this, Maharaj commented, “Gunatitanand Swami’s greatness is not due to the seat. He is eternally great.” So saying, he revealed Gunatitanand Swami’s greatness as Akshar, his divine abode, to Shukmuni.

Also, after Maharaj had passed away, Shukmuni often went to Junagadh to stay in the company of Gunatitanand Swami. Shukmuni frequently said, “I wrote the Vachanamrut and researched them, but have understood them only today. When Gunatitanand Swami speaks one feels the same satisfaction as when Maharaj spoke.”

Once, Acharya Ayodhyaprasadji Maharaj was sick in Ahmedabad. Gunatitanand Swami and Shukmuni had come for his darshan. While there, Gunatitanand Swami spoke openly of Maharaj’s glory as Purushottam in the assembly.

One day, in the assembly, Gunatitanand Swami said to Shukmuni, “Maharaj once

asked you in Akshar Ordi to write a letter to some devotees. In that letter, you described Maharaj to be like Prahlad and King Janak, who were great devotees of God. Maharaj tore up that letter. When you wrote the letter again, you described him to be like the avatars of Vishnu, Dattatrey and Kapil. Maharaj also tore that letter to pieces. By then, the candle lighting Maharaj's room had blown out, and so Maharaj lit up the room with a beam of light from the big toe of his right foot. Within that light, you saw Ram, Krishna and the other avatars with folded hands, praying before the divine, ever-youthful *murti* of Maharaj."

(Maharaj had thus revealed to Shukmuni that he was neither a devotee nor an avatar but God himself, Gunatitanand Swami said.) Hearing Gunatitanand Swami's words, Shukmuni recalled the incident and was convinced both of Maharaj's supreme glory and Gunatitanand Swami's greatness.

* * *

In 1865 (Samvat 1921), after having celebrated a festival in Vartal, Shukmuni came to Mahelav. There, he gave *vartman* to Dhoribhai's six-month-old son, Dungarbhai, who later became known as Shastriji Maharaj, and blessed, "This child will do great work for *satsang* and will spread Maharaj's true *upasana*."

* * *

Seventeen years younger than Maharaj, Shukmuni's physical condition had always been delicate. On 4 December 1868 (Magshar *vad* 5, Samvat 1925), Shukmuni passed away in Vartal.

Maharaj has praised Shukmuni in Vachanamrut, Kariyani 3, saying, "This Shukmuni is a very great sadhu. From the day he began staying with me, his enthusiasm has been ever increasing; in fact, it has never diminished. Thus, he is like Muktanand Swami."

Shukmuni was a great Sanskrit scholar. Some of his works include:

- *Buddhi Pradip*
- *Gnan Pradip*
- *Prarthana Mala*
- *Lokmangalakhyan*
- *Vishvamangal Ashtottarashatanam*
- *Shikshapatri Anvayarth Tika*
- *Satsangijivan Hetu Tika*

His Gujarati works include:

- *Editing of the Vachanamrut*
- *Dasham Uttarardh*
- *Buddhi Prakash*
- *Dharmamrut*
- *Narayan Kavach*
- *Satsang Deep*

Bhakti Adhyay

- *Hari Gita*

Commentary on the Dharmik Stotra

- *Prarthnamala*

4. Bhaktaraj Shri Jhinabhai Darbar

Bhaktaraj Shri Jhinabhai Darbar

The Royal Court of Junagadh was crowded with *darbars*, or village chieftains. Beer

bottles lay before them as glasses full of alcoholic drinks and opium pipes were passed around. An exotic dancer entertained the crowd to the beat of live music. Singing, dancing, alcohol. The lecherous chieftains revelled in these sensual moments.

One *darbar*, however, sat in the corner with his head down and eyes glued to the floor, feeling uneasy as ever. The *nawab*, head of the royal court and the city's main administrator, was too busy to notice, for he was engrossed in accepting praises from his subordinates. Suddenly, however, his eyes fell on the lonely chieftain. It was Jhinabhai of Panchala.

Seeing Jhinabhai aloof from the crowd, the *nawab* gained deep respect for him. "This soul is one that is truly in love with God. He seems to have conquered his senses," he remarked, amazed.

Panchala, Jhinabhai's village, is in the Nagher region of Sorath, the southern part of Saurashtra.

Jhinabhai was born in 1792 (Samvat 1848). His father was Thakor Manubha, a Solanki Vaghela Rajput and descendent of the great King Siddhraj Jaisinh.

When Jhinabhai was ten years old, his father, a disciple of Ramanand Swami, received both Ramanand Swami and Nilkanth Varni in his court in Panchala. During this visit, Jhinabhai received Ramanand Swami's blessings for the first time.

After Ramanand Swami passed away, Jhinabhai was drawn towards Shriji Maharaj by Maharaj's miracles. Along with Jhinabhai, his mother and sister, Gangaba and Adiba, also soon became devotees.

Jhinabhai had a great liking for *satsang*. Though being born and brought up amidst the luxury of a royal family, he had a deep dislike for material pleasures. In fact, he saw nothing other than misery even in the best of sense pleasures. To please Maharaj, he strictly followed the vows of *satsang*. He lived a simple life, constantly fearing that his love for Maharaj could at anytime drift elsewhere. Seeing his constant awareness, Maharaj often used to praise him.

A large portion of Jhinabhai's income was spent for *satsang*. Moreover, the greatness of Maharaj's fellowship was firm in Jhinabhai's mind, and so he would always help other devotees, would not bear talks or even thoughts of their bad qualities and would take their side even at the cost of his life.

Jhinabhai was deeply devoted to Maharaj, and so he would often stay with Maharaj to listen to his talks. Moreover, he would unfailingly invite Maharaj, his sadhus and devotees once a year to Panchala to celebrate grand festivals. In hosting such festivals, Jhinabhai would spend freely. Indeed, Jhinabhai had dedicated his life for *satsang*.

* * *

As the drought of 1813 CE (Samvat 1869) threatened the region, Maharaj began touring everywhere to warn his devotees in advance of the coming troubles. Taking Maharaj's advice, Jhinabhai sold his livestock and stockpiled grains. Accordingly, once the drought hit, he was able to help devotees, as well as the poor, by giving away large amounts of grains.

However, despite his generosity, Jhinabhai's farms still reaped profits. So, he gave

extra donations in accordance with Maharaj's wish. Moreover, he asked that Maharaj keep 50 sadhus at his place until the drought passed. Maharaj granted his wish. Jhinabhai thus served the sadhus, and benefitted from their company and discourses.

* * *

Jhinabhai once requested Maharaj to come to Panchala and to bring with him, along with other devotees, Jivuba and the other female devotees living in Gadhada. Maharaj, wishing for the women to stay back, left for Panchala without them. Jhinabhai, however, insisted that they come. And so, although it was not Maharaj's wish, Jhinabhai gathered all the female devotees and left for Panchala along with them. He soon caught up with Maharaj. On seeing that Jhinabhai had disobeyed his wish, Maharaj turned back for Gadhada, disappointed.

Jhinabhai had much love for Maharaj. At the same time, though, he was a bit obstinate. To teach him a lesson and to rid him of this flaw, Maharaj decided to return to Gadhada. Jhinabhai pleaded, tearfully urging Maharaj to come, yet Maharaj was adamant. Sura Khachar and others later cheered Maharaj, yet his decision not to visit Panchala was firm.

Jhinabhai would often attempt to please Maharaj in his own way. But Maharaj believed that one should always act according to God's wishes. He would thus say, "It is not wise to offer bhakti with stubbornness, for neither such bhakti nor such love last long."

On another occasion, Jhinabhai was deeply hurt by Maharaj's decision not to come to Panchala. However, he realized his mistake and felt guilty. His hurt was soothed by spiritual understanding. Maharaj loved his devotees and had a forgiving nature.

Three or four months later, Maharaj came to Panchala and blessed Jhinabhai with a chance to serve him and listen to his talks. Jhinabhai was both intelligent and knowledgeable. Realizing his level of thought, Maharaj gave profound discourses on spirituality, leaving him pleased. These discourses today can be found in the Panchala section of the Vachanamrut.

* * *

Jhinabhai was an expert in managing business ventures or events. Whenever Maharaj held grand *yagnas* or festivals, Jhinabhai would arrive ahead of time to lead the preparations. His arrangements were excellent and the events he managed were always a success.

Jhinabhai was firm when it came to observing his moral vows. He would not tolerate even the slightest lapse. In fact, he was so staunch in his vows that he had won the respect of the entire Satsang community. Accordingly, Maharaj would often send him to reprimand devotees that had faltered in their vows.

Seeing that it was Jhinabhai's deep desire, Maharaj decided to celebrate the Fuldol festival of 1823 CE (Samvat 1879) in Panchala with great festivity and joy. Thousands of sadhus and devotees were invited to come. Tents of varying sizes were set up all around as temporary living arrangements for the devotees. Once they began to arrive,

he served them the best of foods. Maharaj also pleased everyone with his sublime talks.

On the night of the full moon, the devotees went along with Maharaj to an open field on the village outskirts. Adorned in rich, gold-threaded clothes and beautiful ornaments, Maharaj arranged for everyone to dance in a *ras*. Nine circles were made, the first few being of sadhus, then of *parshads* and finally of devotees. Sadhus, playing the *jhajh* and *mrudang*, filled the air with rhythmic kirtans and music.

To everyone's delight, Maharaj appeared in numerous forms and played *ras* with each and every devotee, showering them with divine bliss. They exhausted themselves, dancing late into the night. With the manifest Purushottam Narayan himself granting such divine joy who would want it to stop? However, Maharaj finally brought the *ras* to a close at 2.00 a.m.

The next day, the day of Fuldol, the devotees prepared themselves for the festival. Mounds of *gulal* were brought, and water tanks were filled with coloured water. As the festival began, Maharaj began throwing handfuls of *gulal* on the devotees and spraying them with coloured water from his *pichkari*. He continued until the devotees were soaked.

Maharaj then instructed the sadhus to join, and so the sadhus formed a team to play against the devotees. Maharaj, standing atop the stage, began spraying coloured water on everyone.

After the festival, Maharaj, along with the sadhus and devotees, went to the river for a bath.

Jhinabhai could not contain his joy, for Maharaj had blessed him with the opportunity to sponsor the festival. Jhinabhai had arranged a sumptuous meal for all the devotees, villagers and the poor from surrounding areas. The Fuldol festival of 1879 in Panchala has a special place in the *sampraday's* history.

Once the festival had ended, Maharaj decided to reintroduce a ritual in the *sampraday*. Now that the British had taken over India, times had become easier for Maharaj's sadhus. Harassment was a thing of the past. Maharaj's sadhus could now freely worship. Seeing the improved situation, he instructed his sadhus to once again keep *shikhas* and wear *janois*. He again gave them all pujas. He then taught them all to apply the *gopichandan* tilak and *kumkum chandlo* on their foreheads by first applying it on his choicest devotee, Gunatitanand Swami. Pointing towards Gunatitanand Swami, Maharaj said, "This is my *tilak*, and this is my sadhu. There is no sadhu like him and there is no God like me."

* * *

Jhinabhai was very enthusiastic about doing *satsang*. In order to be with Maharaj, he set up temporary residence in Gadhada. He would thus spend half of his time in Panchala and the rest in Gadhada.

Once, Jhinabhai stayed in Gadhada for a stretch of nine months. Soon, however, he began getting letters calling him back home. But he wouldn't read the letters. Instead, he would slip them underneath his mattress, unopened.

After some time, a letter came to Maharaj asking whether or not Jhinabhai was in

Gadhada. Upon reading the letter, Maharaj asked Jhinabhai whether he had received the messages from home.

"I have received letters, but I haven't read any of them," he replied. "If I were to read them, my peace would be disturbed. I would start getting thoughts of going home and I wouldn't be able to enjoy your discourses."

Maharaj immediately instructed him to return home, and so he returned to Panchala. After Jhinabhai had left, Naja Jogia, another devotee, often began speaking of Jhinabhai before Maharaj. Maharaj once asked him the reason why he spoke so often of Jhinabhai.

Showing Maharaj the *dhotiyu* he was wearing, Naja Jogia replied, "When Jhinabhai was going home, he gave me this *dhotiyu* and, in return, asked me to speak of him before you. He wished that he may be blessed."

Hearing of Jhinabhai's sentiments Maharaj was pleased.

* * *

Once, in order to test Jhinabhai's faith, Maharaj became ill in Panchala. No remedies seemed to be working on him.

Fearing the worst, Muktanand Swami said to Maharaj, "Even an ordinary *bawa* or *vairagi* leaves his mark by establishing an ashram sometime during his life. You are Purushottam Narayan. If you pass away without having left something behind, your stay on earth will be rendered worthless."

Taking Muktanand Swami's advice, Maharaj decided to build mandirs, initiate sadhus and create shastras.

"Prepare for lunch and I will get better," Maharaj said. Once lunch was ready, Maharaj ate. Soon thereafter, he recovered from his illness.

* * *

Once, Jhinabhai came to Mangrol. Here, he came to know that Kamalshi Vanjha had fallen very ill and that nobody was looking after him. Kamalshibhai was a poor basket weaver, yet a great devotee. Hearing the news that Kamalshibhai was sick, Jhinabhai went to see him. Upon seeing Jhinabhai, Kamalshi began crying, for it seemed as if none of Kamalshi's relatives cared for him.

Jhinabhai was pained to see Kamalshi's predicament. He wished to take him home with him, yet Kamalshi was too weak to walk. So, Jhinabhai went into town and called some labourers to lift his entire cot. He was able to find only three labourers, and so he acted as the fourth labourer. He lifted the fourth leg of the cot himself and, with his free hand, held his horse's reins.

As Jhinabhai and the labourers came out of Kamalshibhai's home, they ran into one of the village leaders. Seeing Jhinabhai, a highly respected *darbar*, lifting the cot himself, he quickly called another labourer from the village to relieve Jhinabhai. Thereafter Jhinabhai sat on his horse and led the labourers to his home.

Upon arriving in Panchala, Jhinabhai asked his sister, Adiba, where to place Kamalshi's cot. Adiba did not respond, as she was repulsed at the thought of having to

care for such a poor devotee.

Ignoring his sister, Jhinabhai had Kamalshi's cot placed in his own room. He served him day and night, washing his clothes, feeding him and serving him with greater care than he took of even himself.

Once, Kamalshibhai had a severe headache, and so Jhinabhai asked his sister for some black pepper as medicine.

"We don't have any in the house," Adiba said, brushing aside Jhinabhai's request.

A few days later when Jhinabhai had a headache, Adiba brought some black pepper for him.

"Where did this pepper come from?" Jhinabhai asked.

"There was some left in the house," Adiba replied.

"There were no peppers available when they were needed for Kamalshibhai, and today they have been found!" Jhinabhai spoke sternly.

Furious, Jhinabhai tossed the bottle of pepper outside and stopped speaking to his sister.

When Maharaj came to know that Jhinabhai had lifted poor Kamalshibhai's cot and had served him with such love, he came to Panchala and hugged him seven times. Maharaj was very pleased, for Jhinabhai had served a poor, yet true devotee.

Soon after, Maharaj celebrated the Hutasani festival in Panchala. After the festival, Adiba asked for Maharaj's forgiveness and prayed that he convince Jhinabhai to begin speaking to her again. Maharaj spoke to Jhinabhai, who accepted Maharaj's wish and started speaking to his sister again.

* * *

Jhinabhai fell gravely ill in Junagadh. Maharaj was in Gadhada when he heard news of his illness. He mounted his horse and left for Junagadh immediately, arriving in the middle of the night.

The sound of his horse's hooves awakened everyone in the *darbar* as he entered. News soon spread that Maharaj had arrived. Maharaj went straight into the main bedroom and sat on Jhinabhai's cot, next to his pillow. Seeing Maharaj, Jhinabhai was overjoyed.

It seemed as if Jhinabhai were nearing his end. Maharaj asked him whether he wished to ask for anything for his son, Hathisinh.

"If he becomes your devotee, you will look after him, whether I ask you to or not," Jhinabhai replied. "And if he does not become your devotee, you will not look after him even if I ask you. Prahlad's father never asked God to look after his son, did he!"

Maharaj listened patiently. "Do you wish for anything for yourself?" he then asked.

"Please make a mandir here for the devotees of the Sorath region," Jhinabhai replied.

Maharaj agreed to Jhinabhai's request, promising him to build a mandir in Junagadh. "Which *dham* do you wish to go to?" Maharaj then asked. "Badrikashram, Shvetdvip, Vaikunth, Golok or Akshardham?"

"Maharaj! Please keep me forever in your service, just as you have kept Bhaguji,

Miyaji and Mulji Brahmachari," Jhinabhai replied, referring to Maharaj's personal servants.

Gangaba, Jhinabhai's mother, was saddened on hearing her son's words, for it dawned upon her that he was nearing his end.

Maharaj comforted her. "Oh, mother!" he said. "What if I were to give your Jhina the kingdom of Junagadh?"

"That would be great, Maharaj."

"And what if I give him the kingdom of Vadodara? Or that of Indra? How about that of Brahma or Prakruti Purush?"

Gangaba was pleased at the prospects Maharaj was making.

"I wish to give him the kingdom of Akshardham," Maharaj then said.

With these last words of Maharaj ringing in his ears, Jhinabhai closed his eyes, forever taking his seat in Akshardham. The date was 16 December 1828 CE (Maghshar *sud* 10, Samvat 1885).

Everyone from the *darbar* soon set out to perform Jhinabhai's funeral rites. On his way out of the *darbar*, Maharaj himself lifted Jhinabhai's bier. As he came out onto the street, however, the devotees took it off his shoulders.

Everyone was surprised at the scene, for Maharaj had not given his shoulder to lift the bier of even his younger brother, Ichharambhai.

Muktanand Swami asked Maharaj why he had offered his shoulder for Jhinabhai.

"Jhinabhai gave his shoulder to lift Kamalshi Vanjha's cot, and so I gave my shoulder to lift Jhinabhai today," Maharaj replied. "With Jhinabhai's bier in hand, I walked double the number of steps that Jhinabhai had walked while lifting Kamalshi's cot." So saying, Maharaj described the blessings one earns by serving God's devotees.

Jhinabhai was a star amongst Shriji Maharaj's circle of devotees. In fact, his name is linked to Maharaj in the Sarvamangal Stotra, a list of Maharaj's 1,008 names. Thousands of devotees around the world remember Jhinabhai to this day while reciting the Sarvamangal Stotra, for within it they honour Maharaj by chanting '*Hemantarchastutipritay Namaha'*, a name that pays tribute to Maharaj's affection for Jhinabhai.

5. Bhaktaraj Joban Pagi

Bhaktaraj Joban Pagi

He looked simply resplendent. He was young, and his long, matted hair was tied in

a knot on top of his head. His thin body covered in only a loin cloth, he sat on the edge of a lake in Vartal.

Believing him to be a great yogi, Joban Pagi came close and bowed before him.

"How nice it would be if such a yogi were to stay with us," Joban thought.

"I will give you a room," he promised the yogi. "Please stay here."

The yogi replied softly, "I wish to go on a pilgrimage. But I will come to your home on the way back and will stay in your village."

On enquiry, Joban learnt that the yogi had come to Vartal from Umreth after having travelled to various parts of the country.

He offered the yogi a meal. Accepting the offer, the yogi came to Joban's home. He cooked food using Joban's grains, offered the food to God and then ate.

Soon after, he went to rest at the home of Devkaran Pagi, one of Joban's relatives.

Upon awakening, the yogi left for Bochasan, promising that he would be back someday.

Years later, the yogi came back to Vartal as Shriji Maharaj.

This time, it was at the insistence of Bapujibhai, a devotee of Vartal, that Maharaj had come, and so Maharaj decided to stay at Bapujibhai's home. While there, Maharaj not only gave discourses, but also sent people into samadhi. Through samadhi, Maharaj showed his divine powers, attracting many people towards him.

Bapujibhai had eight sons, Ranchhoddas being one of them. His wife, Rangbai, served Maharaj with great love and also hired a Brahmin to cook sumptuous meals for him.

Maharaj had previously granted Joban Pagi darshan in Vartal as the yogi, Nilkanth Varni, yet Joban had forgotten Maharaj due to the stark evil that had enwrapped his mind.

Joban Pagi was an infamous bandit. He was such a terror in Gujarat that not even great kings dared to utter his name. He roamed hundreds of kilometres committing crimes, even in broad daylight, yet nobody could catch him.

Joban's three brothers were Sunder Pagi, Shakaro Pagi and Dalo Pagi. Part of a very large family, the four brothers were strongly united.

Joban once called forth his younger brother, Sundar. "A *bawa* has come to the Patidar's enclave," Joban told him. "Everyone believes him to be God. Let's go test his godhood. He has a fine horse, a *Rojho*. Go and steal it. We'll take it to a far-off land. Let's see if he can do anything to stop us. Let's see what kind of God he really is."

Sunder blankly refused. "I have had his darshan," he said. "He is a man of miracles and he has a radiant appearance. He surely looks as if he could be God. I dare not toy with such a great man, for I fear the consequences."

Joban, however, was eager as ever to test Maharaj. So, he woke up in the middle of the night and left for the Patidar's enclave. Reaching Bapujibhai's home, he slowly pushed open the entrance gate. Yet, the gate stuttered, awakening Raiji, a devotee. Jumping up with sword in hand, Raiji swung open the gate only to see Joban Pagi, a giant of a man, standing before him.

"We are many brothers, just as you," Raiji boomed. "We are not afraid of you."

"I have come to see how great your guru really is," Joban said. "Today, you stand in my way, but what will you do when Swaminarayan is in another village?"

Joban soon turned back, disappointed by his failure.

Three or four days later, Maharaj left Vartal. Thereafter, he visited Vartal many times, nourishing *satsang* in the village.

Joban Pagi and his brothers soon came in touch with *satsang* by the influence of Maharaj's sadhus.

A few years later, in January 1810 CE (Posh, VS 1866), Maharaj organized a grand *yagna* in Dabhan. Thousands of devotees from all over came to attend. Swift horses belonging to the noblest of Kathi Darbars filled the village outskirts. Of these horses, the fame of Bhagwan Swaminarayan's *Rojho* had spread far and wide.

Joban was tempted by Maharaj's horse. "If I had such a horse, I could cover many kilometres in a single night," he thought. "Looting would be so much easier."

Maharaj's horse rested in a stable that was covered by the thick growth of a banyan tree. Joban approached the stable, having decided to again attempt to steal the horse. It was a dark night, quiet all around. Cautiously, Joban entered the stable and approached Maharaj's horse. But as he went to untie the horse, he saw circles of light coming from somewhere. Looking up, he saw Bhagwan Swaminarayan in gold-threaded clothes. Joban jerked his hands back from the horse, shocked. Stepping back, he retreated and soon disappeared into the darkness.

The next day, there were thousands of devotees in the assembly before Maharaj. There was pin drop silence. Everyone's eyes were focused on Maharaj's *murti*.

An unknown, edgy looking man soon entered. It was Joban Pagi. All of a sudden, he jumped onto the stage and fell at Maharaj's feet. Maharaj tried to help him up, but he would not move. He began crying profusely, washing Maharaj's feet with his tears.

Slowly, Joban got up. Choked with emotion, he asked Maharaj to forgive him.

"Oh, Lord!" he pleaded. "Muktanand Swami had told me much of your greatness, but doubts remained in my mind. I came here at night to steal your horse, but before every horse, I had your darshan."

So saying, he continued, "Lord, I come from a family of disrepute. I am crooked, worthless and foolish. I was unable to recognize you for who you are. Oh compassionate one! Please have pity on me. Please free me from my sins."

Hearing Joban's heartfelt words, Maharaj patted his back and comforted him. He forgave him for his misdeeds and had him take the vows of *satsang*, thus drawing him away from his life of crime.

He who had made Gujarat tremble for years was now a devotee.

* * *

Now that Joban and his brothers were devotees, they would travel with Maharaj as bodyguards whenever he came to Gujarat.

Maharaj once came to Vartal on his way back from Dharampur, bringing Joban Pagi along with him.

"You served me well along the way," Maharaj told Joban. "I am pleased with your

services. I wish to grant you a boon."

"Oh, Lord," Joban said, with his palms folded. "I already have you, a *kalpavruksh*. What more could I want?" Then Joban paused and added, "I have only one desire. Please celebrate the Holi festival here. Invite thousands of people and grace me with the opportunity to serve."

Maharaj agreed to Joban's request. He promised to celebrate the festival in Vartal. Just before leaving the village, he instructed Joban to commence preparations.

Soon thereafter, as Holi approached, Maharaj came back to Vartal in order to fulfil Joban's wish. Maharaj had invited devotees from all around to the grand festival.

Nishkulanand Swami had made a beautiful, twelve-sided *hindolo* that he had set up in Gnanbag for Maharaj. On the day of the festival, he had Maharaj wear resplendent clothes and ornaments and sit on the *hindolo*. Muktanand Swami then began swinging Maharaj.

Pleased by Joban's profound love, Maharaj decided to make the festival truly memorable. He thus assumed twelve forms, granting darshan to all through each of the *hindolo*'s twelve sides.

The next day, Maharaj celebrated Rangotsav, also in Gnanbag. By throwing mounds of *gulal* on the sadhus and devotees and drenching them in coloured water, he gave them divine joy.

The festival was a truly memorable experience for all who were present.

* * *

On another occasion, Maharaj again celebrated Fuldol in Vartal. He stayed on the first floor of Joban Pagi's home. One night, as Maharaj slept, Joban Pagi and Hamir, another devotee, decided to stay up to guard Maharaj. But, as the night grew quiet, both Joban and Hamir fell asleep.

Meanwhile, Khodabhai, a devotee from Bhudej, came to get Maharaj's permission to leave.

Maharaj thought to himself, "The loving devotees of Vartal won't let me leave anytime soon. I, too, might as well leave right now, since everyone is asleep."

Accordingly, Maharaj left with Khodabhai, the two of them sitting in a bullock cart. The cart rattled as it moved, thus startling Joban awake. Joban called out asking who it was.

"It's me, Khodabhai!" Maharaj replied, trying to pacify him and resolve his doubt.

Still drowsy, Joban failed to recognize Maharaj's voice. He went back to sleep, thinking nothing of the sounds that had awakened him. Having fooled Joban, Maharaj soon disappeared into the darkness of the night.

In the morning, as the village awakened, devotees began coming to Joban's house for Maharaj's darshan. "Maharaj is asleep because he is is tired," he told them, not knowing that Maharaj had really gone.

A little while later he checked the room. Maharaj's bed was empty and he could not be found anywhere. Upset, the devotees rebuked Joban for letting Maharaj slip away.

After some time, they found out that Khodabhai had come at night, so they went to

Budhej to inquire after him. Maharaj smiled slightly, amused to see the devotees of Vartal in Budhej. He calmed them and then soon left for Gadhada. From Gadhada, he returned to Vartal to celebrate Annakut.

* * *

In April 1822 (Chaitra, VS 1878), Maharaj performed the groundbreaking ceremony for a mandir in Vartal. Devotees promised Maharaj to donate various services for the mandir. Joban, for one, had already given his land, yet Maharaj asked for still more assistance.

"You shut down my business," Joban replied jokingly. "I used to bring home riches by committing banditry from here all the way to Pune. Even on the way, I would rob any good targets I found. But how can I offer you money now that I am out of business?"

Maharaj replied, "Only he who follows dharma according to my commands is truly great. Being poor doesn't make a person insignificant. True greatness lies in observing dharma. On the other hand, one who spends large sums of money in charity and makes mandirs but does not follow dharma never attains *moksha*. The wealthy are often egotistical. And so only the righteous, whether rich or poor, are truly dear to me."

Maharaj continued, "I am not pleased with someone who brings me dishonest money. Rather, such a person angers me. For, Dharma is my father, and so one who transgresses dharma even slightly is an enemy of my father. How can such a person ever be dear to me?"

Joban listened patiently, nodding his head.

"Anyway," Maharaj went on, "rather than you giving money, I am more pleased with you helping physically. And so please help me by willingly offering yourself in service."

Accepting Maharaj's request, Joban and his brothers promised to help. They also prayed that their lineage be blessed and that their descendants remain closely attached to the mandir.

Construction of the mandir soon began. Maharaj frequently visited Vartal to oversee the work. On one such visit, he celebrated Fuldol in the village, spraying colours on all. After the festival, he left to go for a bath with his sadhus.

"Let's go to your Khodiyar Mata mandir today," Maharaj said along the way.

Pagi was pleased on hearing Maharaj's words. Today was to be Mataji's lucky day, for she was to be blessed with Maharaj's darshan.

On arriving at the mandir, Maharaj stood before Mataji's *murti* and sprinkled *gulal* on her. "The goddess has become a devotee today!" Maharaj said.

Mounting his horse, Maharaj then left the mandir, stopping for a bath at a well in Piplad.

* * *

Joban Pagi had once gone to Vaso. Kashiyabhai, a devotee from Vaso, was seated on the first floor of his home. He saw Joban approaching from afar.

“Joban was once dreaded,” he thought. “Gates would shut and children did not even make a sound when he was around. Yet, he who once terrified us today humbly walks the streets of Vaso with a *tilak-chandlo* on his forehead and a *mala* around his neck.”

Kashiyabhai was opposed to Maharaj, but he was amazed at Joban’s transformation. He called Joban out of curiosity.

“Hey, Joban!” he exclaimed. “What have you seen in Swaminarayan that drives you to walk around proudly with such an obnoxious *tilak* on your forehead? Is it by some miracle that he has transformed you from being as wild as a donkey to as humble as a cow?”

Joban replied firmly, yet respectfully. “Kashiyabhai,” he said. “You still wish to see a miracle? Isn’t it a miracle enough that you’re standing here talking to me? I was a most-wanted bandit, yet Swaminarayan has made a devotee out of me. He’s put a *kanthi* around my neck and a *mala* in my hand. Doesn’t that amount to transforming someone who was as wild as a donkey into someone as humble as a cow?”

Kashiyabhai was dumbfounded. “Yes, yes,” he said, nodding his head, not knowing what else to say.

* * *

After Maharaj returned to Akshardham, Joban felt lost, never knowing what to do. “Why does my body not shatter without Maharaj?” he thought with anguish. The words of Maharaj’s *sadgurus* calmed him. They told him to eat a pinch of Maharaj’s sacred ashes everyday.

With Maharaj in mind, Joban would take a little bit of the holy ash everyday with his meal. This routine helped him feel close to Maharaj, keeping his mind at peace.

Once, when Joban sat to eat, his wife served him *rotlo* and buttermilk. On not seeing the ash in his dish he asked his wife to bring some.

“The ash has run out,” his wife replied, hesitantly.

“What?” Joban replied with a jolt. The shock of his wife’s words was too much for him. He stopped breathing instantly, and passed away there and then. Joban’s *atma* attained the eternal bliss of Akshardham and proximity of Maharaj.

6. Bhaktaraj Jivuba

Bhaktaraj Jivuba

“You act like such a great devotee, yet you’ve blemished the family name! You’re

hiding a *bawa* in the *darbar*! Where is he? Speak up!" So saying, Abhel Khachar barged into his daughter's room, sword in hand, ready to swing.

At that time, his daughter, Jivuba, was deep in meditation, holding a bowl of milk and offering it to Thakorji.

"Set aside this sham," Abhel Khachar boomed. "If this God of yours is really true, he'll come this instant and drink that milk. Otherwise, my sword is ready to cut you to pieces."

Suddenly, the room was filled with divine light. God came forth from the *murti*, giving darshan as Chaturbhuj Vishnu. He then began drinking the milk Jivuba was offering.

Dismayed, Abhel Khachar was stunned with fear. His sword fell to the ground. Upon returning to his senses, he fell at the feet of God.

Jivuba's delight new no bounds, for God himself was standing before her very eyes. He had come to save her today. Tears of joy streamed from her eyes. He soon disappeared, and the divine light that had filled the room merged back into the *murti*.

Choked with emotion, Abhel Khachar asked for Jivuba's forgiveness. "My dear child," he pleaded. "Who is this that you worship?"

Jivuba's reply was firm, yet polite, "I worship the manifest form of Purushottam Narayan, the cause of all the avatars," she said. "He is all pervasive, yet he has taken on a human form and walks the earth as one of us. It is Sahajanand Swami himself. You have had his darshan. He is God, the very form of Parabrahman. If you worship him with a full understanding of his greatness, you too will win him over."

"People say a *bawa* roams the *darbar*," Abhel Khachar interrupted. "Who is he? And who drank the milk you were offering?"

"Bapu," Jivuba replied, "it is our guru, Sahajanand Swami."

Jivuba had cleared Abhel Khachar's doubts. Abhel Khachar repented for what he had done. He felt that God himself is living in his *darbar*, yet he was unable to recognize him. Furthermore, he had brandished his sword, ready to cut his own daughter to pieces. Burning with guilt, Abhel Khachar found comfort in prayer.

Abhel Khachar was the village chieftain of Gadhada. His daughter, Jivuba, was born in 1785 CE (Samvat 1841). She was considered lucky to have lived, for all of Abhel Khachar's previous children had died prematurely. She was thus named Jivuba. Moreover, she was Abhel Khachar's eldest child, so she was also called Motiba. Further, she was born on Punam, so she was also known as Punamatiba. She was also known to some as Jaya.

From a young age, her life was focused on bhakti. She was also very fond of austerities. Wishing to keep her mind constantly focused on God and away from the sense pleasures, she had decided to give up *khatras,* the six different types of tastes. Further, she would follow such strict vows as sleeping on the floor and staying at least 20 feet away from men not closely related to her. Also, she would constantly stay engaged in serving God, wishing to please him.

When Jivuba came of age, Abhel Khachar began looking for a virtuous young man for her marriage. As soon as Jivuba found out, she refused point blank.

"Bapu!" she said. "I don't want to get married. All I wish to do in my life is worship God."

According to the traditions of Kathi Darbars, all women when they reach the appropriate age must get married. Abhel Khachar knew of Jivuba's intense bhakti right from when she was a child, yet, sticking to tradition, he convinced her to get married. Giving in to her father's insistence, Jivuba soon married Hathiya Patgar, son of Amara Patgar of Kundal.

After her marriage, Jivuba went to live with her in-laws. Raibai, her mother-in-law, was a simple woman, and so Jivuba told her of her true desire. "I wish to remain celibate and worship God," Jivuba said, slowly.

Raibai understood Jivuba's sentiments. She convinced her son to give his wife permission to worship God and dedicate herself to him. Jivuba then got a letter of permission from him and returned to Gadhada.

On seeing his daughter return home, Abhel Khachar was furious. Flushed with rage, he came forth to beat her, but was silenced when he saw the permission letter in her hands. Abhel Khachar was left speechless.

Jivuba was now free to spend day and night engaged in bhakti to God.

* * *

Bhagwan Swaminarayan had entered Gujarat and had come to Sorath after having travelled across the length and breadth of India as Nilkanth Varni, spreading dharma.

Jivuba, a great soul from the past, had developed a divine vision that allowed her to constantly have Maharaj's darshan as he made his way towards Gujarat.

During his travels, Maharaj once came to the banks of the Unmatt Ganga, the Ghela River, in Gadhada. The all-knowing Maharaj wanted to fulfil Jivuba's wish by granting her darshan. He thus sent a message to her in the *darbar* saying he had arrived. For years, Jivuba had been craving for the darshan of the manifest form of God, and so she was simply delighted on hearing the news that he had come.

Slipping away from their father's alert eyes, Jivuba and her younger sister, Lalita, or Laduba, secretly ran off to the banks of the Ghela for Maharaj's darshan. There they saw Maharaj. The sisters felt peace just on having his darshan. They requested Maharaj to come to the *darbar*. He agreed, but how could he come? Abhel Khachar would never welcome him.

Jivuba happened to have a clay pot and some extra clothes with her. Thinking quickly, she had Maharaj dress as a shepherdess and gave him her pot to complete the costume. Amongst a group of similarly dressed women, Maharaj entered the *darbar*, unnoticed.

Unknown to Abhel Khachar, Maharaj stayed in the *darbar,* accepting the sisters' bhakti. A month had passed. Soon, however, Abhel Khachar came to know that a *bawa* was living secretly in his *darbar* and that Jivuba was taking care of him. As soon as he found out, he ran to beat his daughter. But he stopped on having Maharaj's darshan. Thus clearing Abhel Khachar's doubts, Maharaj disappeared.

* * *

Abhel Khachar originally was a follower of Ramanand Swami, and so he was aware that Ramanand Swami had appointed Sahajanand Swami as his successor and the head of the Sampraday. He had gone for his first darshan of Sahajanand Swami when Maharaj was in Kariyani, yet, at the time, he knew nothing of Maharaj's greatness. He was unaware that this was the very Maharaj his daughter worshipped. Instead, he saw Maharaj as just another mahant.

Soon, however, Maharaj came to stay in Gadhada. Abhel Khachar began serving him, now with an understanding of Maharaj's greatness. Jaya, Lalita and their younger brother, Dada Khachar, were also constantly in Maharaj's service.

Won over by the family's bhakti, Maharaj decided to make Gadhada his home. Accordingly, he returned to stay in the village after celebrating festivals and completing his *vicharan*.

* * *

Seated in a chariot, Jivuba was once coming from Kariyani to Gadhada. On her way, soon after she had left Kariyani, she saw a sadhu seated beneath a tree. She sent her charioteer to find out what was wrong with the sadhu.

Upon asking, the charioteer came to know that it was Akhandanand Swami and that he was seated underneath the tree because he was stricken with diarrhoea and had no energy to walk.

Unable to bear the sight of Maharaj's sadhu suffering, Jivuba came down from her chariot and laid a soft blanket in it. She then told the charioteer to seat the sadhu inside and to make sure he reached Gadhada safely.

The charioteer did as he was told, picking up the ill sadhu. Jivuba, on the other hand, walked to Gadhada with her servant. Jivuba had no shoes, so she had to walk barefoot, despite the intense heat. Being a princess, she was unaccustomed to walking in such a way, and so she was hurt by thorns and rough stones along the way. Yet, she had dropped concern for her own well being, as her efforts were for the sake of serving one of Maharaj's sadhus.

Maharaj was very pleased when he came to know of Jivuba's selfless service. "Serving my sadhu is as good as serving me," he remarked.

* * *

Jivuba had firm faith that Maharaj was the supreme God, Purushottam Narayan. Yet, she desired to have darshan of his divinity.

"Oh, Lord!" she once asked. "I wish that you show us your divine powers, just as Lord Krishna had shown his."

To fulfil Jivuba's wish, Maharaj picked up a ball of flowers and tossed it. With the flowers in the air, a gust of wind swept through the sky. Everyone looked up, only to see that the avatars and *devas* had come in chariots to have Maharaj's darshan. By showing that the avatars had come for his darshan, Maharaj showed his supreme

greatness to all.

* * *

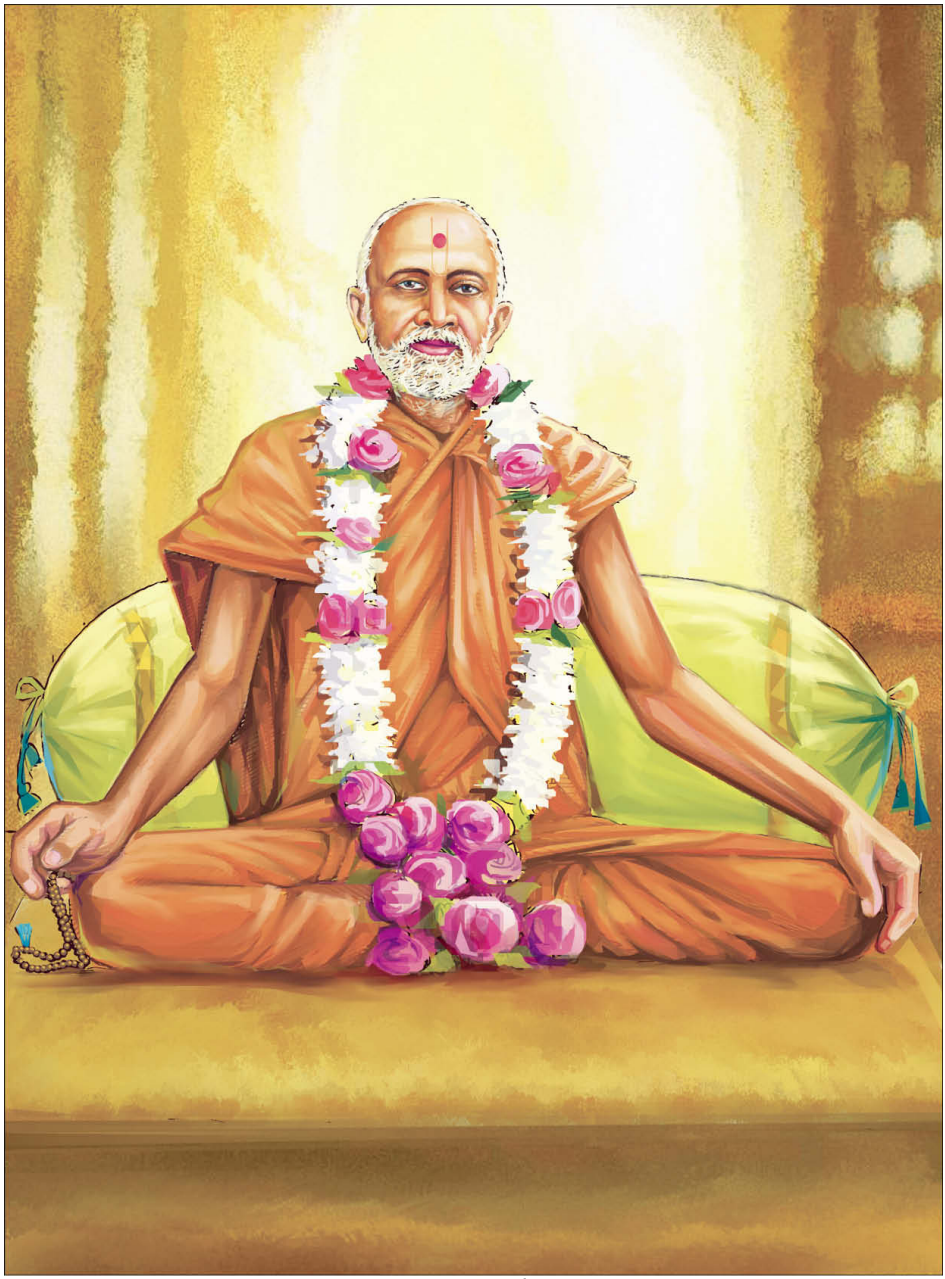
Jivuba was inclined towards bhakti. And, by Maharaj's grace and through his association, she was also enlightened with spiritual knowledge.

Her knowledge once shone through particularly well when Maharaj sent Ladu Barot, a royal poet, who had recently become a devotee, to convince Jivuba and her sister to get married and live according to the rules of householders. Ladu Barot spoke to the sisters, but Jivuba replied by telling the poet about the futility of the world and its affairs. She further explained to him that the body is nothing but a container full of rotting waste, nothing worth being attracted towards.

Jivuba's description was so detailed that it left Ladu Barot disgusted, feeling as if he would vomit. Jivuba's words had convinced him of the world's futility.

Jivuba passed away to Akshardham on 26 May 1860 (Jeth *sud* 6, Samvat 1916), with thoughts of Maharaj forever dancing in her mind and heart.

7. Swami Nirgundasji



Swami Nirgundasji

A peaceful darkness had pervaded Vadodara's night air. All was calm. Yet, slight

noises could be heard coming from behind the mandir, in the *pradakshina*. The clock struck four. The pujari had come to the mandir for *mangala arti*. Taking a look behind the mandir, he saw Shastri Yagnapurushdasji, an honourable sadhu and a great scholar, talking with Jethabhai of Pij.

"Goodness, you've been here since yesterday afternoon!" the pujari exclaimed, looking at Yagnapurushdasji. "You're still here talking? You seem to be quite passionate about *satsang*!"

Yagnapurushdas answered with just a smile. He and Jethabhai both then went for their morning bath.

Jethabhai had come to Vadodara to study at Kalabhavan. He had begun coming to the mandir everyday after having heard much about the Akshar-Purushottam *upasana* from Govindbhai Master, Shivshankarbhai, Ullasrambhai and other devotees. It was here that he came in touch with Shastri Yagnapurushdasji.

The Satpurush is always in search of true spiritual seekers. Jethabhai, however, was not just a seeker; he was also a great soul. His spiritual endeavours of past lives had helped foster in him affection for Yagnapurushdasji.

He soon began spending more and more time with him. Once, spending the entire night talking, Yagnapurushdasji kindled within Jethabhai firm faith in the eternal forms of Akshar and Purushottam. He also explained to him that Bhagatji Maharaj was the manifest form of Akshar-Purushottam and the gateway to *moksha*. Yagnapurushdasji's words were authentic, for they were quoted from the Vachanamrut. Hearing Yagnapurushdasji, Jethabhai's eyes were opened.

* * *

Jethabhai was born to a Patidar family in the village of Pij, near Nadiad, on 25 May 1876 (Jeth *sud* 2, Samvat 1932). From a young age, he seemed uninterested in living a worldly life. Instead, he preferred to spend time at the mandir and with sadhus.

Shastri Yogeshwardas and Jagatpavandas would often come to Pij from nearby Dabhan. Through their association, Jethabhai grew closer to *satsang*. Moreover, through the association of Muljibhai, a devotee, he came to understand Bhagatji Maharaj's greatness. Soon after, Bhagatji Maharaj appeared before him, granting him darshan in the Pij mandir. After moving to Vadodara, Jethabhai grew even closer to *satsang*.

Jethabhai went for Bhagatji Maharaj's darshan for the first time in October 1895 (Kartik, Samvat 1952). With him was Ganpatbhai, son of Mahashankarbhai Dave of Bharuch.

The two travelled by boat. During their journey, however, the waters suddenly became very rough.

The boat's captain gravely eyed the waters. "There seems to be no escape," he said.

Jethabhai began praying to Bhagatji Maharaj and assured everyone that Bhagatji would save them. The group began singing kirtans. Within moments, the tide settled, putting everyone at ease. With the waters turning calm, the group safely reached Mahuva.

Once in Mahuva, Jethabhai offered *dandvats* to Bhagatji Maharaj from the village outskirts so as not to be seen. For, Mahuva mandir's sadhus and *brahmacharis* were wary of those that followed Bhagatji, and so they never liked it when people did *dandvats* to him.

As the days passed, Jethabhai took every possible opportunity to serve Bhagatji and to hear his discourses. He would go to Bhagatji's home early each morning for spiritual discussions then would accompany him to the Malan River for his morning bath. Throughout the day, he would also listen to Bhagatji's discourses at the mandir. After some time, Jethabhai returned to Pij.

After returning home, Jethabhai once again came to Mahuva with a group of devotees from Pij. This time, however, he caught a fever. While sick, he rested on the mandir's upper floor.

Bhagatji Maharaj once came to his bedside to grant him darshan. He put his hand on Jethabhai's head and began his talks. Jokingly, he told Jethabhai, also known as Jethalal, "Jetha and Lal. Lal means *atma*. Become *atmarup* and worship God." Bhagatji's loving words pleased Jethabhai.

The fever soon subsided, yet Jethabhai still felt very weak. "If Bhagatji hugs me, I will definitely feel better," he thought. With this notion in mind, Jethabhai got out of bed and walked to Bhagatji's home all alone.

When he reached, Bhagatji was lying down, yet he instantly awoke upon seeing him.

Reading Jethabhai's thoughts, Bhagatji said to him, "I want to make you better today. Come, let's hug." So saying, Bhagatji embraced him. Jethabhai was overwhelmed with happiness. Today, Bhagatji had fulfilled his wish.

* * *

At Bhagatji Maharaj's command, Jethabhai took initiation into the *parshad*–fold on 17 April 1897 (Chaitra *sud* 15, VS 1953). Now known as Jetha Bhagat, he began serving as Acharya Viharilalji Maharaj's personal assistant, answering his letters and helping with his literary works. His efficiency, etiquette, and detachment soon made him a favourite of the Acharya. The same year that Jetha Bhagat took *diksha*, the Acharya appointed him as *kothari* of Mumbai mandir. Thereafter, he also served as *kothari* in Vadodara, Junagadh and Gadhada mandirs.

When Bhagatji Maharaj fell ill in Mahuva and wished to go to Akshardham he wrote a letter to Jetha Bhagat in Mumbai. Learning of Bhagatji's illness, he immediately left for Mahuva.

Once Jetha Bhagat reached Mahuva, Bhagatji kept him in his personal service. Jetha Bhagat served Bhagatji for a total of 23 days, earning his grace.

Before passing away to Akshardham, Bhagatji Maharaj bestowed a boon upon him, "You shall forever be blessed by God and his holy Sadhu," he said.

Around this time, Yagnapurushdasji was studying in Rajkot. Swami Jaga Bhagat, one of Gunatitanand Swami's foremost disciples, resided in nearby Junagadh. Yagnapurushdasji wished that Jetha Bhagat come to Junagadh so that he could benefit

from Jaga Bhagat's discourses.

So, by Yagnapurushdasji's wish, Jetha Bhagat gave up his post as *kothari* in Mumbai and came to Junagadh. For six months, he stayed with Jaga Bhagat and listened to his discourses. He also served in the mandir's treasury and listened to the discourses of Sadguru Balmukunddasji, Sadguru Dharmaswarupdasji, Sadguru Narayandasji and Sadguru Krishnacharandasji.

Jetha Bhagat had already earned Bhagatji Maharaj's blessings. Now, by serving in Junagadh mandir, he had also earned Jaga Bhagat's blessings. By the grace of his guru, Bhagatji Maharaj, he developed a firm conviction in the Akshar Purushottam *upasana*.

* * *

Yagnapurushdasji's fame spread far and wide within the Sampraday. Unable to bear his growing influence, a group of sadhus convinced the Acharya to turn against him. The Acharya, in turn, began showing great disregard towards Yagnapurushdasji.

The wrath of sadhus in Vartal towards Yagnapurushdasji continued to grow. Seeing the increasingly tense situation, reputed devotees, including Krishnaji Ada, a great devotee who had earned Gunatitanand Swami's grace, insisted that Yagnapurushdasji and his sadhus leave Vartal. Taking their advice, Yagnapurushdasji and his sadhus soon left Vartal. Kothari Jetha Bhagat, unable to part with Shastriji Maharaj, left along with him.

Jetha Bhagat took *bhagvati diksha* on 19 January 1906 (Maha *sud* 5 – Vasant Panchmi – VS 1962), at the hands of Acharya Kunjvihariprasadji Maharaj of Vadhwan. Jetha Bhagat's new name was Nirgundas Swami.

* * *

The golden age for the spread of Akshar Purushottam *upasana* had begun. Yet, the early days were filled with countless obstacles. Nirgundas Swami had become a partner to Swamishri in tackling these obstacles. He had kicked aside his dignified position, power and grandeur within the Sampraday and firmly resolved to please Swamishri by spreading pure *upasana*. Bhagatji Maharaj and Jaga Bhagat had strengthened him with spiritual understanding, and so despite the opposition, threats and insults coming from all sides, he remained happy and unflinching.

"Nobody ever had the courage to tell me to wear saffron," Nirgun Swami would often say. "However, Swamishri told me, 'Your intellect, knowledge and ability will shine only when you accept the saffron robes, but not in white!' Those few words stuck in my mind and I soon took initiation."

Nirgun Swami's strict demeanour was awe-inspiring. As long as he was in Vartal, no sadhu could ever speak against Jaga Bhagat or Pragji Bhagat. In fact, they did not even have the courage to utter the sounds, 'Ja' or 'Pra', such was Nirgun Swami's influence.

Yet, before Shastriji Maharaj, such a powerful sadhu as Nirgun Swami had become a humble servant. He would dig mandir foundation pits, go from village to village asking for alms, look after devotees and take up many other such services. In doing so, he would set aside concern for himself and serve enthusiastically with an

understanding of the glory of Satsang.

He was driven by vigour to push forth for the sake of *upasana* and for Swamishri, even if it cost him his life. Accordingly, he would often sing the following couplet:

'Re rang sahit Harine ratie, re hāk vāge pāchhā nav hathie;
Brahmānand kahe tyā mari matie, re shir sāte Natvar ne varie."

Meaning, "We worship Hari (God) with full joy and abandon,
When the call comes we will never fall back.
We will fight on where Brahmanand directs us."

Nirgun Swami was passionate about spreading knowledge of Bhagwan Swaminarayan, Akshar-Purushottam, Atma-Paramatma, Brahman-Parabrahman, and of Shastriji Maharaj as the manifest form of Maharaj and Swami. He would speak unfailingly and enthusiastically, using references from the Vachanamrut, Gita and Bhagvat to inspire both *satsangis* and new aspirants. He also often wrote letters to devotees, nourishing them spiritually and helping them in every way.

Nirgundas Swami always accompanied Swamishri during festivals, *parayans* and assemblies held specially to strengthen the Akshar-Purushottam *upasana* within devotees. He would speak relentlessly, for he had a good grasp of the Vachanamrut principles and his style of explaining them was extraordinary.

Swamishri also kept Nirgun Swami at his side when it came to making major decisions regarding the Satsang fellowship and its management. Nirgun Swami was also in charge of the Sanstha's government-related work, as he was never hesitant to meet important officials.

Moreover, he was an expert at arranging festivals and looking after the devotees who attended. During festivals, he would go out on rounds throughout the night, a lantern in hand, checking whether each devotee had received a blanket. If it happened that a devotee had taken more than one blanket, Nirgun Swami would take the extra blanket and give it to those in need. He would also look after devotees who arrived late in the night.

One of his unique qualities was his interest and involvement in devotees' lives. He was shaken by any pain a devotee ever had to undergo. Understanding the greatness of Shastriji Maharaj's devotees, he would involve himself in their problems, believing their problems to be his own. He would help them in any way possible, giving them stability and peace of mind.

* * *

Nirgun Swami used to travel outside of Gujarat to Khandesh every year to spread *satsang*. The devotees of Khandesh, immigrants from Gujarat, were very loving. Realizing the extent of their affection, Nirgun Swami would explain to them Shastriji Maharaj's greatness.

On 5 February 1919 (Maha *sud* 5, VS 1975), Nirgun Swami arranged for the Vasant Panchmi festival to be celebrated in Khandesh. Swamishri, as well as many other sadhus and devotees, arrived there for the festival.

The devotees from the surrounding villages were simple, innocent people and they

saw great divinity in Swamishri. Pleased with their love for him, Swamishri showered them with divine bliss.

The devotees of Khandesh were engrossed in Swamishri due to Nirgun Swami's constant efforts. However, despite his own greatness, Nirgun Swami never drew devotees towards himself, but always told them to attach themselves to Swamishri.

Swamishri, on the other hand, would often take the opportunity to reveal Nirgun Swami's greatness to devotees. Nirgun Swami once gave a Khandesh devotee a boon that a child would be born to him. The devotee later came to Swamishri, asking him for the same boon again.

"Nirgun Swami has already given you the boon, hasn't he?" Swamishri replied. "His boon will bear fruit, without a doubt." Swamishri's words helped the devotees of Khandesh understand Nirgundasji's true significance.

* * *

Various types of activities were going on in each of the mandirs. Moreover, Swamishri's *vicharan* was unceasing – one day he would be in Charotar (Gujarat) and the next day in Saurashtra. *Satsang* activities continued without halt. During such activities, Nirgun Swami would always be by Shastriji Maharaj's side.

If anybody ever fell back from *satsang*, Nirgun Swami would reach out to him without fail. With his talks based on the Vachanamrut and other *satsang* shastras, he would speak to him of the greatness of Purushottam and of Shastriji Maharaj, the manifest form of Akshar-Purushottam. However, never would he let someone fall from *satsang*.

* * *

At Swamishri's behest, Nirgun Swami once went with a devotee named Ishwarbhai Prabhudas Patel to bring Radharamanprasad, Acharya Laxmiprasadji Maharaj's son, from Chhapaiya. Yet, Radharamanprasad's sister refused to let him go and so Nirgun Swami and Ishwarbhai turned back.

As he was returning to the train station Nirgun Swami fell off his horse. He suffered injury to his abdomen and head, causing intense pain.

The village people treated him, but his pain would not lessen. In fact, the pain was so bad that he truly thought he would go to *dham*. But then he thought of Swamishri, wishing to have his darshan one last time. He prayed.

Soon, Shriji Maharaj appeared before him seated on his Manki, with a small silver vessel full of milk in his hand. He passed his hand over Nirgun Swami, and then made him drink the milk. Drinking Maharaj's nectar-like milk, having his darshan and experiencing his touch relieved Nirgun Swami's pain.

The next morning, Nirgun Swami was completely well. He left for Kashi with Ishwarbhai and Shrijiswarupdas, one of Shastriji Maharaj's sadhus. From there, he returned to Gujarat.

* * *

Formerly, as *kothari* in Mumbai, Nirgun Swami had explained about Shastriji Maharaj's unmatched greatness to Motilal Fojdar, Ramji Keshav and other respected devotees. After joining with Swamishri, Nirgun Swami continued his efforts to help *satsang* grow in Mumbai. The number of devotees in the city began to increase due to Nirgun Swami's inspirational letters and repeated visits to the city. Swamishri accompanied Nirgun Swami on many such visits. Nirgun Swami was always willing to help these devotees, young and old, in times of need, and so they greatly respected him alongside Swamishri.

By nature, Nirgun Swami was stern. If work was not done properly, he would become cross and, if necessary, would even use harsh words. However, he would quickly forgive and forget, never holding grudges. Moreover, if he was ever at fault, he would not hesitate in the least to ask for forgiveness. In this way, despite being stern, he was also easy going.

Once, some devotees asked Swamishri, "What pleases Maharaj and Swami at the present time?"

"They are pleased by the building of Akshar-Purushottam mandirs," Swamishri replied. "Maharaj will make *brahmarup* and take to Akshardham anyone who offers even the least bit of service towards building such mandirs."

Nirgun Swami then added, "Along with building mandirs, they are also pleased if the greatness of both Bhagatji Maharaj and his present form, Shastriji Maharaj, are spread."

Everyone was pleased upon hearing Nirgun Swami's reply, for it made evident that his every pore was filled with an understanding of Shastriji Maharaj's greatness.

* * *

Aside from his unceasing *vicharan* and letters to devotees within the country, Nirgun Swami also began writing of the greatness of Akshar-Purushottam and Shastriji Maharaj in a stream of letters to Africa, where Harmanbhai and Maganbhai, two devotees, had established Satsang. Nirgun Swami's letters were not just a few pages long, but were sometimes up to 100 pages in length. Moreover, his letters, written to various devotees, were organized well and written point-to-point, clearly, without scratches and strictly according to the Vachanamrut and other scriptures.

Seeing Nirgun Swami's affection for them, the devotees of Africa would enthusiastically read his letters, contemplate on his words and put the teachings into practice.

When people questioned his unflagging efforts, he would reply in his naturally forceful way, saying that the letters should undoubtedly continue as they pleased the devotees of Africa. Moreover, he would say that it was his good fortune to have this opportunity to serve the devotees in such a way.

Although Nirgun Swami was so highly respected by the devotees, he had no expectations from them. A devotee from Africa once sent him a new, woollen blanket, hoping he would keep it for himself. Nirgun Swami, however, immediately gave the rich blanket to Shastriji Maharaj, hoping he would use it.

Once, devotees once sent a few shillings to Nirgun Swami by postal order, with a letter telling him to use the money for postage since he wrote to Africa so often. He was displeased on reading the letter. He immediately gave the postal order to the mandir treasury and sent a letter of sweet rebuke to the devotees, “Never send money for me. Anything I need is provided through the mandir.”

Nirgun Swami’s tireless efforts had given impetus to the spread of *satsang*, and so his fame quickly began spreading throughout the Sampraday. Yet, he always bowed before Yogiji Maharaj’s innate saintliness and humility. “Recognize Yogiji Maharaj for who he is,” Nirgun Swami would often say. “He is not one who can be recognized easily.”

* * *

Despite being a respected sadhu, he would always find and take up even menial services. If there was ever any dirt, filth or disarray anywhere in the mandir, he would reach there immediately and enthusiastically set things in order.

Once, preparations were underway for a festival in Bochasan. Swamishri’s glance fell upon a big pile of dirt that had come up in one corner of the mandir. Seeing Swamishri looking towards the dirt, Nirgun Swami pulled up his *dhotiyu*, took a shovel in hand and began removing the dirt himself. When he began work, it was morning. By evening, he had moved many cartfuls of garbage all by himself.

* * *

Nirgun Swami’s unmatched management skills and devotion towards his guru shone through once again during Shastriji Maharaj’s 80th birthday celebrations, as well as during the Suvarna Mahotsav.

Soon after, however, he fell ill. He was brought to Mumbai for treatment, yet his illness and the resulting weakness he suffered left him feeling constantly uneasy. Swamishri would give him courage, yet Nirgun Swami prayed to him as if his end were near. “Please forgive me if I have ever done anything wrong or if I have ever not been able to act according to your wishes. Now take me to Akshardham.”

Swamishri was choked with emotion on hearing Nirgun Swami’s prayers. For, today, Swamishri’s right hand, an idol of valour and a warrior for Satsang lay helpless in bed.

“We still have to do *arti* of Gadhada mandir,” Swamishri said, passing his hand over Nirgun Swami. “Keep courage. Maharaj will make you better.”

Soon after, Nirgun Swami’s condition worsened. He was taken to the village of Pen, a short distance from Mumbai, for treatment. He did not wish in the least to be separated from Swamishri, as he knew these were his last moments. Yet, it was Swamishri’s wish that he go to Pen, and so Nirgun Swami prepared himself for the trip.

The day Nirgun Swami was to leave, Swamishri came to him. He put his hand on Nirgun Swami’s head then passed it over the rest of his body, blessing him. “Maharaj will make you better quickly,” Swamishri said. “We will meet later, when you are well and good.”

Swamishri looked long and hard at Nirgun Swami. He was Swamishri's partner, his shield in times of joy and sorrow, honour and insult. He was a revered sadhu and, in *satsang*, as courageous as a lion. Yet, this was to be their last moment together. Nirgun Swami was put into an ambulance, which soon left for Pen. Once the ambulance had left, Swamishri went into his room and sat on the floor. The atmosphere was gloomy.

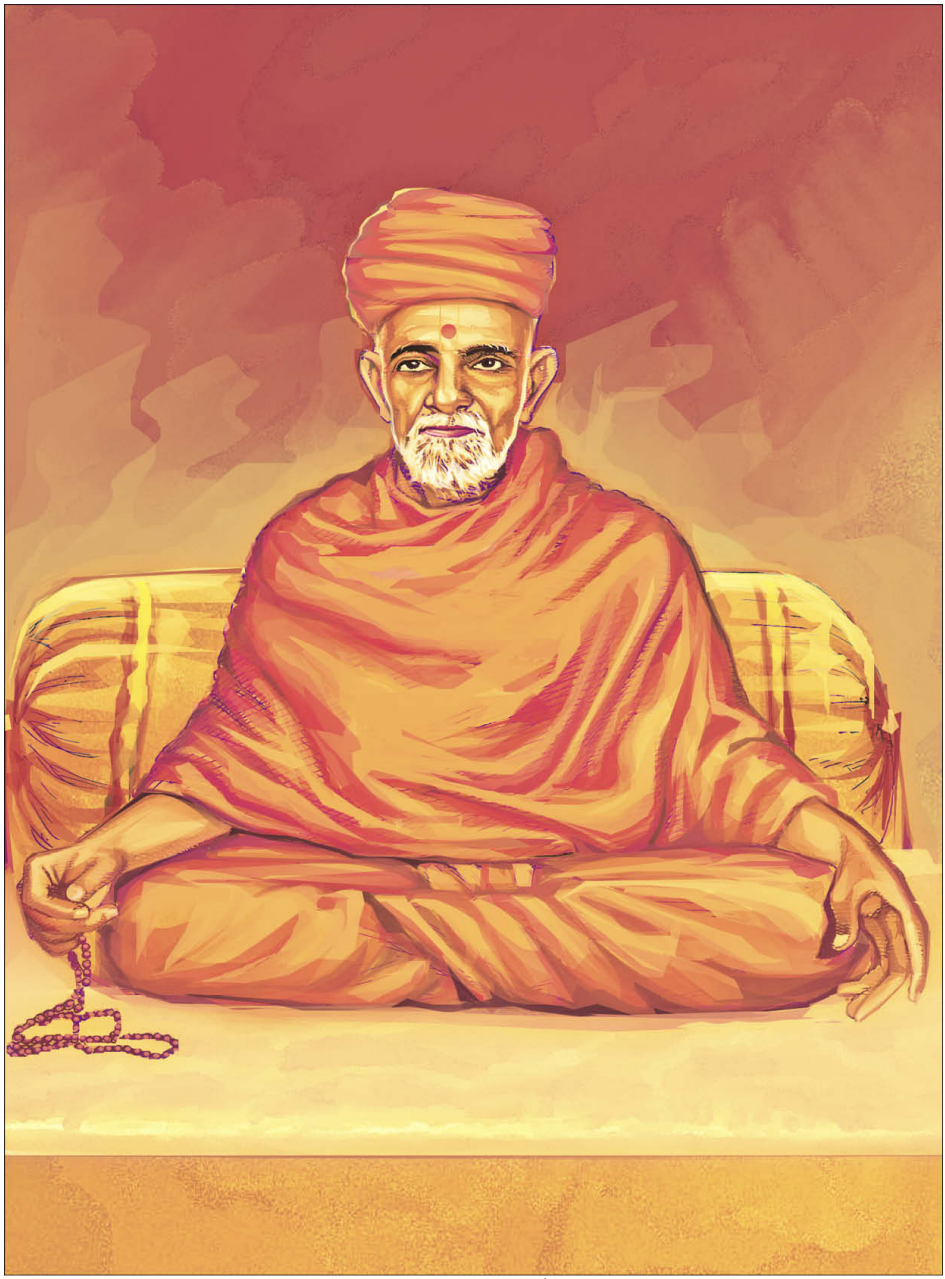
Being away from both Swamishri and the *satsang* community, Nirgun Swami's health declined further. At last, with Swamishri's permission, he was brought to Anand. Here, continuous prayers and discourses were begun before him.

Unable to bear being away from Swamishri, he would frequently tell devotees, "Convey my Jai Swaminarayan to Swamishri. Please ask him to grant me darshan just once." In return, whenever he would receive word from Swamishri, his face would blossom with happiness.

Swamishri was in Ahmedabad at the time. He too fell ill, while Nirgun Swami's condition deteriorated still further in Anand. Nirgun Swami began uttering Shastriji Maharaj's and Bhagatji Maharaj's names without pause. On Tuesday, 30 May 1950 (Jeth *sud* 14, VS 2006), he left his body, forever taking his place in Maharaj's service in Akshardham.

From the start, Nirgun Swami had fostered faith in Akshar-Purushottam within seekers residing both in and out of the country. He was a powerful individual and an idol of affection, always standing by Shastriji Maharaj's devotees. He was a partner for the afflicted and a saviour for the poor. Finally, he played a great part in the development of Satsang, leaving earth only after instilling thousands of devotees with faith in Akshar-Purushottam.

8. Swami Yagnapriyadasji



Swami Yagnapriyadasji

It was a *dharmashala* for sadhus that had been sanctified by Shriji Maharaj. As

Ashabhai looked inside, he saw that it was packed full with a crowd of devotees. He was stunned to see such a large crowd in such a small place. But at the centre of the crowd, there was a radiant individual telling the story of King Bharat. Ashabhai's eyes were glued to the scene. He stood frozen.

A friend who had come with him shook him back to his senses, telling him it was no use standing there. Acting on his friend's advice, Ashabhai dragged himself away. Yet even after having left, his mind remained fixed to the scene. It had been his first darshan of Shastriji Maharaj.

The brothers, Ashabhai and Ishwarbhai, lived in Sadhi, a village near Vadodara. They were true spiritual seekers, quite wealthy, and managed a Ramanandi mandir in their village.

Every Punam, Ashabhai would go to Dakor for darshan of Ranchhodray. Here, he was saddened on seeing some instances of unrighteousness.

One night, Ranchhodray granted him darshan in a dream and told him, "If you wish for your liberation, take refuge in Bhagwan Swaminarayan. At present, he is manifest and moves about within Satsang."

Sometime later, a few Swaminarayan sadhus came to Sadhi. Ashabhai went for their darshan and expressed a wish to serve them a meal.

"We will accept your food only if you take refuge in Bhagwan Swaminarayan," the sadhus replied.

Deeply wishing to serve the sadhus, Ashabhai agreed. He soon took *vartman* from the group's head sadhu, Dharmanandandas.

A short time thereafter, Ashabhai went for darshan at Vartal. He was delighted on seeing Vartal's extraordinary mandir, sadhus and devotees. Moreover, it was here that he had Shastriji Maharaj's darshan again. Ashabhai was overwhelmed by an experience of inner peace.

Soon after, Shastriji Maharaj came to Sadhi. During his stay, Ashabhai came to know him better. Further, he gained affection for Swamishri, also acquiring faith in his words. Being with him settled his qualms and convinced him that, through Swamishri, he had attained *moksha*. He bowed his head before Swamishri's lotus feet.

In a short time, Ashabhai accepted the Akshar-Purushottam *upasana*. Thereafter, as instructed by Swamishri, he offered his services for the *pratishtha* preparations of Akshar-Purushottam *murtis* in Vadhwan mandir.

* * *

To ease his financial difficulties, Ashabhai had purchased farm lands in Chhota Udepur. Although Swamishri had refused him to go, Ashabhai could not let go of this temptation because of the financial gain it offered.

"If you believe me to be great, do not go," Swamishri said. "Your problems will go away. I will slip them right under my cushion."

Ashabhai's heart was pierced by Swamishri's loving words. He felt his pains being removed before his very eyes. He obeyed Swamishri's wish, which brought Ashabhai closer than ever to him.

* * *

Swamishri's saintliness and diligence led certain elements of the Sampraday to treat him with great hostility, . Very much against his own will, Swamishri was forced to leave Vartal mandir. Ashabhai was witness to his departure. Swamishri was a highly respected sadhu, a shining star amongst the Sampraday's thousands of sadhus. How could the devotees put up with his exile? Seeing that Swamishri was in need, Ashabhai, as well as many other devotees, stepped in to help, putting themselves, their families, their wealth and their property at his disposal.

Slowly but surely, Swamishri began organizing festivals and *parayans*. Ashabhai and Ishwarbhai would go for Swamishri's darshan on all such occasions. Moreover, for the ongoing construction of Bochasan and Sarangpur mandirs, they would offer their all. Whenever Swamishri required money for the mandirs, he would request Ashabhai and Ishwarbhai, who would do whatever they could to get Swamishri the amount he needed.

To avoid controversy and conflict with the devotees of the Vartal sect residing in Sadhi, Swamishri rarely visited the village. However, as a result, Swamishri's devotees living in Sadhi were deprived of the opportunity to serve him personally. So, they decided to move elsewhere.

During a festival in Bochasan, they asked Swamishri where they should purchase new land and settle. Swamishri agreed with their decision to move and asked them to purchase land on Ajva Road, near Vadodara.

Soon after, Swamishri himself took a bullock cart and went with the devotees to see the land. Swamishri had always been especially interested in land matters. Moreover, he had great affection for the devotees and so helped and guided them in their personal affairs.

With Swamishri's permission, Ashabhai purchased land in Jesangpura. Soon after, with Swamishri's guidance, he also bought land near Radhu. Swamishri then had various devotees purchase chunks of this land from Ashabhai, leaving Ashabhai with a profit, which he later donated for the Sarangpur mandir. In this way, Swamishri often encouraged devotees to work together in farming, hoping to both benefit them and the mandir, and bring devotees closer to each other.

* * *

Ashabhai once wished to invite some devotees to his farm in Sayajipura for a feast of *ponk*. Swamishri, however, asked that he arrange a grand festival instead. Ashabhai agreed, so Swamishri sent invitations to all devotees.

Time was short, but since Ishwarbhai had good contacts with the government depot in Vadodara, he was quickly able to get tents, decorative cloth, carpets, large pots and pans and other necessities. He rented forty bullock carts to bring the materials to Sayajipura. As instructed by Swamishri, the brothers tore down five old houses on the farm overnight and, in place of the houses, set up tents.

Big land owners of Gujarat, officials of Vadodara and thousands of devotees came

for the festival, during which Swamishri read wonderful incidents relating to devotion and spiritual knowledge from the Bhagvat and Satsangijivan. Moreover, Nirgundas Swami, Mahapurushdas Swami and Vignandas Swami, three of Swamishri's sadhus, spoke on the greatness of a true sadhu.

Ashabhai and Ishwarbhai had given their all towards making the sadhus and devotees feel welcome. Dining arrangements were lavish. Devotees were given *patlas* to sit on and German silver dishes. The dining area was also decorated with *rangoli* and filled with the fragrance of incense sticks. Devotees were served new delicacies every day, alongside various types of meals.

The festival concluded on Punam. The brothers performed *pujan* of Swamishri and his sadhus, did *arti*, then presented them *dhotiyas* and offered a donation. Throughout the festival, the sadhus and devotees had been witness to Ashabhai's extraordinary faith and his love for *satsang*. Once the festival had ended, the devotees parted, singing Ashabhai's praises.

Soon after, another marvellous festival, inspired by Ashabhai and Ishwarbhai, was held in Koyli. Here, the brothers honoured Swamishri by receiving him on a royal seat placed atop an elephant. They also organized a month-long *parayan* in Radhu, during which the entire *satsang* fellowship was invited.

* * *

Ashabhai and Ishwarbhai worked hard on their farms. They reaped good harvests, but were often struck by natural calamities that left them at loss and deep in debt. Yet, they never prayed for Swamishri to solve their problems, for they believed that he was only testing their faith. Others, including Nirgundas Swami, would appeal to Swamishri on their behalf. In response, Swamishri would simply smile.

The *murti-pratishtha* of Sarangpur mandir was fast approaching. Around this time, Swamishri came to Radhu along with Ashabhai, Ishwarbhai and Motibhai, another leading devotee.

Ashabhai lived on a farm he owned in Purushottampura, about three kilometres away from Radhu. There, in his home, he kept his entire year's stock of cotton, grams, wheat and other crops.

However, while he was in Radhu with Swamishri, his young son accidentally dropped a burning matchstick on a large pile of cotton in their home in Purushottampura, creating a fire that quickly spread. Before anyone knew it, the fire had engulfed the entire home, as well as all of Ashabhai's possessions. Everyone in the house escaped safely, but nobody had anything with them other than the clothes they were wearing.

News of the fire soon reached Radhu. Saddened, Shastriji Maharaj and his sadhus passed the news to Ashabhai. Yet, by Swamishri's grace and by the spiritual vision Swamishri had bestowed, Ashabhai was not too grieved by the news.

With Swamishri's permission, he went to Purushottampura. On arrival, he saw that all his property had been burnt to ashes. Anyone else would have been heartbroken at such a devastating sight, yet Ashabhai saw this as God's test for him.

With no belongings left, Ashabhai and his family had to ask for *khichdi* from Radhu to eat.

The next day, Shastriji Maharaj came to Purushottampura. Deeply pained on seeing the damage, he comforted Ashabhai and Ishwarbhai.

Yet, as if their test were not over, Shastriji Maharaj remarked, “This is none other than an obstacle for my work. I came here to get money to buy *murtis* from Jaipur for Sarangpur mandir, and here this trouble has arisen.”

Hearing Shastriji Maharaj’s words, anyone else would have lost respect for him for asking for money at such a time. Yet, Ashabhai forever saw Shastriji Maharaj as divine. Moreover, he had an intense desire to follow Swamishri’s wish, even in the toughest and most difficult of times. How could he let go of such an opportunity?

So thinking, he told Motibhai to get the necessary amount for the *murtis* from a nearby money lender. As soon as he brought the money, Ashabhai offered it to Swamishri, who looked at him with surprise. Pleased with the extraordinary sacrifice, Swamishri hugged both brothers, as well as Motibhai.

“Such service in spite of the calamity!” Swamishri remarked. “No one else could have done this!”

“Only one powerful enough to give would have the courage to ask at such a time,” Ashabhai replied, choked with emotion. “How could I ever let such an opportunity pass?”

Everyone present stood marvelling at Ashabhai’s words, for they provided a rare example of pure faith and service.

* * *

Ashabhai’s eldest son, Desai, had come of age. Yet, despite Ashabhai’s repeated requests, Swamishri had refused for Desai to get married.

Once, while working in the pasture, Desai was bitten by a snake. Fearing the worst, some ran to find medical aid. Meanwhile, Ashabhai told everyone who was present to sing the Swaminarayan *dhun*. Yet, the snakebite’s effects were too severe. Desai soon passed away.

Losing his son was a blow Ashabhai simply could not bear. Though he consoled others, he was deeply grieved himself.

However, fifteen days after Desai had died, Ashabhai was once lying in bed at night, thinking. Suddenly, Desai appeared before him. Ashabhai was taken aback, for he knew for sure that he was not dreaming.

“Jai Swaminarayan,” Desai said.

“How is it that you are here?” Ashabhai asked.

“Bhagatji Maharaj is here with me,” Desai replied.

Ashabhai turned, and saw Bhagatji Maharaj before him. As Bhagatji looked at him, Ashabhai experienced inner peace. Bhagatji then explained about Shastriji Maharaj’s greatness and told him to earn Shastriji Maharaj’s grace. He then disappeared.

Ashabhai had always had boundless love for Swamishri. This incident, however, strengthened that love, while at the same time driving away his pain of having lost his

son.

* * *

Day by day, *satsang* began taking greater importance in Ashabhai's life. He and his family were always ready to help when it came to celebrating festivals. He would also always be with Shastriji Maharaj during his *vicharan* in Gujarat (Charotar).

Ashabhai, Ishwarbhai, Motibhai and their families were at the forefront in arranging Shastriji Maharaj's 80th birthday celebrations in Bochasan and the Suvarna Mahotsav, his 85th birthday celebrations in Atladra.

Moreover, it was at Ashabhai and Ishwarbhai's wish that Swamishri decided to build the Gadhada mandir entirely out of marble. Swamishri, in turn, now that the brothers were out of debt and financially sound, told them that they were as rich as the businessmen of Mumbai, and so completing the mandir would be their responsibility. With this instruction from Shastriji Maharaj, the two brothers took up the task of completing the mandir.

* * *

After Shastriji Maharaj passed away, the responsibility of the Sanstha fell upon Yogiji Maharaj. Ashabhai had served for the cause of *satsang* his whole life as a householder, earning Shastriji Maharaj's inner blessings. Yet, his boundless sentiment towards Shastriji Maharaj's Sanstha and the *satsang* fellowship inspired him with an extraordinary wish that led him to make the most momentous decision of his life.

During his entire life as a householder, he had suffered much and had overcome many obstacles. Now, he was wealthy as ever. He controlled vast amounts of land and his family was expanding, as his children began having children of their own. Naturally, towards the end of one's life, a person wishes to relax, enjoy and stay away from hardship. At such a time when Ashabhai should have been enjoying the fruits of his life's labour, he, however, decided to take the path of hardship, one of constant physical and mental challenges. He took upon the life of an ascetic, rejuvenating the tradition of the Purans and Itihas shastras, in which great kings often renounced all they had. Yet, Ashabhai's renunciation stood out, for it was aimed at pleasing his guru only.

Just after Shastriji Maharaj passed away to Akshardham, Ashabhai, at the age of 70, took *bhagvati diksha* at the hands of Yogiji Maharaj. He was named sadhu Yagnapriyadas. However, as he had taken initiation at such a late age, he soon became known as Mota Swami.

After initiation, Mota Swami began doing *vicharan* alongside Yogiji Maharaj and also helped in the numerous tasks that had been assigned to Yogiji Maharaj by Shastriji Maharaj.

Having stayed with Shastriji Maharaj, Mota Swami had heard countless discourses related to the history and philosophy of Satsang. Now that he was a sadhu, he opened his stock of knowledge before the devotees, pleasing thousands of them with his discourses. He also went to East Africa with Yogiji Maharaj. In his later years, he

persevered in putting the finishing touches on Atladra mandir, making an assembly hall, a dining hall, a grand gate and golden *sinhasans* for Thakorji, and completing the *shikhars*. Finally, during the last few years of his life, he blessed all with his darshan while attending both Shastriji Maharaj's Shatabdi Mahotsav and Yogiji Maharaj's Amrut Mahotsav.

After having served the Sanstha continuously for 17 years as a sadhu, Mota Swami passed away to Akshardham. It was as if his work on earth were complete. Truly, the story of his sacrifice left everyone believing that he was the very form of Rantidev, the king who had given his all in the service of others.

Glossary

A

abhishek A ritual offering in respect and reverence.

atma The pure *jiva* distinct from the physical, subtle and causal bodies – i.e., distinct from the *indriyas*, the *antahkaran*, worldly desires, or any other traces of *maya*.

arti Hindu ritual of waving lighted wicks before the *murti* of God as an act of worship.

atmarup One who has realized true self as *atma*.

B

bawa Ascetic.

berkho A small rosary made of large beads.

bhagvati diksha Initiation into the sadhu-fold.

bilipatra Leaves of tree (*eagle marmaloss*) sacred to Shiv.

brahmacharya Eight-fold celibacy and being immersed in Parabrahman.

brahmarup Possessing qualities similar to those of Brahman.

C

chandlo Auspicious round mark of vermilion applied on the forehead.

chhand A musical metre.

chopai A musical metre.

D

dandvat Prostration.

darbar Court of residence of a king or feudal ruler, traditionally with a central courtyard surrounded by rooms with verandas.

deva Deities.

dham Abode.

dharmashala Rest home for pilgrims.

dhotiyu Lower garment worn by men.

dhun Form of *jap*, i.e., chanting of the holy name of God, often to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

diksha Initiation.

E

ekadashi Special religious observance of fasting performed on the 11th day of the bright and dark halves of a lunar month.

G

gopichandan Sanctified sandalwood.

gulal Fragrant reddish powder used on joyous occasions.

H

hindolo Swing.

J

janoi Sacred thread.

jhajh Large steamer.

K

kalpavruksh Magical tree possessing power to fulfil the wishes of anyone sitting under it.

kanthi A double-stranded necklace of miniature beads, usually of wood.

khatras An observance in which only food devoid of the six types of taste – sweet, salty, bitter, sour, spicy, *turu* - is eaten.

khichdi Spiced boiled rice and lentil grain.

kothari Administrative head of mandir.

kumkum Vermilion powder used for applying *chandlo*.

M

mala Rosary.

mangala arti First *arti* of the day, performed at sunrise

moksha Liberation.

mrudang Type of double-sided drum. Traditional Indian percussion instrument played to supply rhythm in the singing of devotional songs.

mukta A liberated devotee, beyond all attachments.

murti Idol of God.

murti-pratishtha Traditional Vedic ceremony in which *murtis* are consecrated in a mandir.

N

nawab A local ruler.

P

pagh Traditional headgear.

paramhansa An ascetic; the best of the four types of sannyasis.

parayan Spiritual discourses held for several days.

parshad A renunciant who wears white robes.

patlo A low platform.

pichkari Water squirter used during Fuldol *utsav*.

ponk Soft, green wheat grain.

pradakshina Circumambulation.

prasad Sanctified food, blessed and consecrated by having been offered to God.

pujan Act of worship.

R

rangoli Traditional design made on festive days with special coloured powder.

ras A traditional folk dance of Gujarat.

rojho A breed of horse.

rotlo Unleavened bread made of millet flour.

S

sadguru Senior sadhu.

Sampradaya Religious organization where there is the traditional transmission of knowledge through successive gurus.

samskars To improve upon something, sacrament.

sanjivani A special herb that rekindles life.

satsang Holy fellowship. Spiritual association.

satsangi A devotee who practices the vows of *satsang*.

shikhar Pinnacle.

shikha Tuft of hair.

sinhasan Throne for God.

sud Bright half of lunar month.

sukhdi A sweet delicacy of wheat flour, ghee and gur.

T

thuli A type of cheap grain.

tilak 'U' shaped mark made with sandalwood paste on one's forehead, chest and arms.

tilak-chandlo 'U' shaped mark made with sandalwood paste and a round mark of kumkum in its centre; a hallmark of one's allegiance to the Swaminarayan Sampraday.

U

upasana Philosophical understanding of the nature of God.

V

vad Dark half of lunar month.

vairagi Ascetic.

vartman Vow.

vicharan Spiritual travellings.

Y

yagna Sacrificial worship. Ceremonial ritual performed as a form of worship to seek the good favour and receive the blessings of the deities.

yati Person with great self-control.